

INSPIRATION

BACCHUS AND THE CULTURAL
HISTORY OF A CREATION MYTH

PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY AND CULTURE

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INSPIRATION

BACCHUS AND THE CULTURAL HISTORY OF A CREATION MYTH

BY

JOHN F. MOFFITT



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DEDICATION

This philological study is dedicated to all inspired, would-be vanguard artists, for it is they who do really need to know these essential art-historical materials.

EPIGRAPHS

“Formavit igitur Dominus Deus hominem . . . et inspiravit in faciem eius spiraculum vitae . . .”

—Genesis 2:7.

“The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun [*nihil sub sole novum*].”

—Ecclesiastes 1:9.

“Io non dipingo per arricchire mà solamente per propria sodisfazione, è forza il lasciarmi trasportare degl’impeti dell’entusiasmo ed esercitare i pennelli solamente in quel tempo che me ne sento violentato.”

—Salvatore Rosa (letter to Antonio Ruffo, 1666)

“Un sot trouve toujours un plus sot qui l’admire.”

“Pour me tirer des pleurs, il faut que vous pleuriez.”

—Nicolas Boileau (*Art Poétique*, 1674)

“Genius has ever been supposed to partake of something divine. *Nemo unquam vir magnus fuit, sine aliquo afflatu divino* [Never was there a genius who did not benefit from divine inspiration].”

—Edward Young (*Conjectures upon Original Composition*, 1759)

“Time present and time past

Are both perhaps present in time future,

And time future contained in time past.

Time past and time future

What might have been and what has been

Point to one end, which is always present.”

—T. S. Eliot (“Burnt Norton”)

“Alas! Hegel was right when he said that we learn from history that men never learn anything from history.”

—George Bernard Shaw

“Like other wares, art is dependent upon producers and consumers.”

—Rudolf Wittkower

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INTRODUCTION: A PERSONIFICATION OF “INSPIRATION”

This book provides the reader with a detailed examination of the historical sources of, and evolving contexts for a certain idea deemed crucial to most praiseworthy modernist art-making.¹ Of particular interest here is a global notion of creative “Inspiration.” The reader perhaps needs to be forewarned that what follows here is largely unburdened by currently trendy, academic applications of “theory.” Instead, and whenever these are available, I prefer to quote eye-witness reports, so allowing the modern reader to become a direct participant in the shifting historical experience of *creative inspiration*. However, given the chronological moment of conception for this particular investigation, at the portentous end of the second Christian Millennium, the reigning attitude is (naturally) “post-modernist.” This mainly means that the reigning tone is “ironic,” but specifically when dealing with the post-classical phenomena, especially those arising after the Romantic era, when the traditional meanings attached to terms like “artist” were radically altered, so leading to the coining of such wholly unprecedented terminology as “self-expression” and “alienation,” among many others to be discussed here.

Inspiration was—and still is—commonly discussed as representing a uniquely privileged psychological condition accepted to be nearly obligatory in order to attain any measure of creative excellence in the Fine Arts. Our immediate task, often verging upon “deconstruction” of a highly esteemed “orthodox” modernist creation-myth, is to show how the idea is itself much older than most of its *post-modernist* celebrants would now probably guess. According to the original—Greco-Latin—terminology, one might arrive at this highly desirable creative condition of *Inspiration* specifically by means of *ecstasy*, *transport*, *enthusiasm*, or even *intoxication*. Along with the revival of classical letters in the Renaissance, the prestige and the ancient terminology of *Inspiration* was likewise resuscitated. Besides being

¹ Funding for this investigation was generously provided by the H.M.S. Phake-Potter Literary Foundation (<http://www.xlibris.com/HMSPhakePotter.html>).

implicitly invested with an intrinsic aesthetic significance—as, however, initially only applied to poetry—also commonly revived were the original *religious* connotations of “Inspiration.” These, as I shall show, are still very much with us.

Albert Rothenberg, a clinical psychologist and the author of a needful examination of the much-discussed issues of *Creativity and Madness* (1994), observes that

Among the mythical fallacies connecting mental illness [including “dementia”] with creativity is the idea of the creator’s frenzy and transport in the experience of inspiration. . . . Closely related to the emphasis on inspiration in creativity is the [complementary] belief in the unconscious creative wellspring. Invoked more frequently in connection with creativity than with almost any other human actions or experience, the unconscious is considered responsible for mysterious bolts from the blue, flashes of insight, waking from sleep with ideas already formed, and energy-releasing altered states of consciousness. . . . The belief in the unconscious roots of creativity is a mystique. . . . A mythic image has arisen of the highly eccentric, if not deeply disturbed, “mad creator” [and] mental suffering is considered both the generator and the price of creativity. . . . The topic of inspiration must [likewise] be taken with large measures of grains of salt.²

Hence, besides tracing the historical evolution of notions of artistic *inspiration*, I will also need to refer to the history of creative *dementia* (with that term literally meaning a “de-braining”). These syndromes I will both treat as “mythical fallacies.” And what follows represents the first comprehensive historical study of the actual workings of their sibling-like “mystique.”

Such as “Inspiration” is self-defined here, and one does so by citing a lengthy series of historical documents spanning some twenty-five centuries, its most characteristic context turns out to be—rather than “art”—instead *religion*. Although this is a historical reality, the fact of a complementary religious function is rarely acknowledged (or even mentioned) by modern students of “Inspiration.” Nonetheless, this factor—“religion”—provides the consistent pattern, or recurring context, for the historical descriptions of *inspiration*. Given its fundamental contribution to the evolving definitions of *inspiration*, *religion*

² Rothenberg, *Creativity and Madness*, 38, 48, 116, 158. Another author has only been able to come up with a “dozen mad poets” in his “study of 2,000 authors . . . who were or could have been [so] certified”; see Hendrickson, *The Literary Life and Other Curiosities*, 130–32.

itself needs to be briefly defined. According to the explanation provided by the modern science of anthropology, all religions seek to answer questions troubling people by demonstrating a cause-and-effect relationship between the supernatural—the divine or other-worldly—and the human, earth-bound condition. Religion is based upon the universal belief in spiritual beings, that is, culturally-postulated superhuman entities; since these beings are not of this world, they are literally “supernatural.” A primary function of religion is to reduce anxiety, and another fundamental use is to create a sense of social solidarity through participation in collective beliefs. Our term comes from the Latin, *religio*, a “tying-together.”

A given religion typically creates a set of rituals, or stereotyped actions, with these ranging from the simplest to the most complex. At one end are the *individualist* expressions; at the other is a public manifestation, the *ecclesiastical* cult, with professional clergy (from the Greek, *ekklesia*, an “assembly”). Besides being ecclesiastical in character, the major world religions are “messianic,” that is, they are derived from such charismatic figures as Jesus, Buddha, and Mohammed, and each of these ecclesiastic institutions has a missionary or imperialistic aspect, seeing itself as the one-and-only religion; hence, they tend to be intolerant of other faiths. However, in the specific context of “Inspiration,” we are mainly interested in the “individualist” religious experience. Our particular targets are: (1) “possession,” in which an individual’s identity is transformed by the infusions of an alien “spirit” said to occupy the body; (2) the complementary “mystical experience,” in which the perceiver experiences loss of personal identity by identifying with a sacred being; (3) this condition enables the diviner to “prophetize,” or reveal the future and otherwise hidden knowledge; and (4) “dreams,” which are probably the most prevalent form of divination.³

One also needs briefly to put *Inspiration* within a global semantic perspective. Considered properly as an essentially invisible but wholly culture-specific artifact, *Inspiration* is a made-up term, a buzz-word, another shibboleth. Currently (2004 CE), other significant culture-specific emotional triggers—with each having its own shifting historical evaluations (and all largely slippery)—include such familiar

³ For these definitions, see Lehmann and Myers, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion*, 2–4, 34, 240.

value-ridden curios as: Aesthetics, Alienation (for artists), Artistry (acceptable versus unacceptable), Authenticity (likewise all that is considered “Un-authentic”), Bad (the), Beauty (and relative degrees of), Canon (the), Celebrity (*la Fama*), Chastity and Cleanliness (the desirability of either), Consciousness (likewise Unconsciousness), Creationism, Creativity, Culture (“proper”), Democracy (acceptable degrees of), Devil (the), Education (“proper”), the Ego and/or Id, Enlightenment (degrees of), Error (degrees of), Etiquette (“Manners”), Ethics, Exemplars (proper cultural models), Faith (“proper”), Family, Fashion, Fatness (relative allowable degrees of), Femininity (“proper”), Fortune (good or bad), Freedom (allowable degrees of), Gender (concepts of), Genius, God, Good (the), Happiness (and relative degrees of), Heaven and/or Hell, Heresy, Holiness, Honor, Hypocrisy, Justice (versus Injustice), Kitsch, Life-After-Death (*Metempsychosis*), Love (authentic versus inauthentic), Masculinity (“proper”), Mental Health (“proper”), Modernism (also Modernity), Morality, Motherhood, Nationalism, Other (the), Obscenity (acceptable degrees of), Orthodoxy (versus Heterodoxy), Passion (acceptable level of), Patriotism, Personality, Political Correctness, Post-Structuralism, Progress (cultural: either forward or backward), Promiscuity (relative degrees of), Prudence (versus Imprudence), Reality (ours versus theirs), Religion (meaning “True” versus “False”), Science (versus pseudo-science), Sexuality (“proper”), Status (Social), Self-Expression (and rights to), Style (“proper” versus “improper”), Taste (Good versus Bad; basically, mine versus yours), Terrorists, Time, Truth, Ugliness (and relative degrees of), Value (of anything or anybody), Vice, Virtue, Wisdom (versus Ignorance), and so forth.

According to reigning post-modernist academic terminology, these phenomena are to be addressed as “cultural constructions.” While we may suppose that someone could, or already did, provide us with an iconological study of each of these prestigious (but nonetheless mostly imagined) cultural entities, oddly *Inspiration* remains as yet without a comprehensive biographer.

In order to focus or centralize—even personify, and in an almost allegorical fashion—all these issues inspired by *Inspiration*, this investigation initially discusses, and as a model Renaissance-Humanist exemplar, a *Drunken Bacchus*, and as artfully carved, between 1496 and 1497, by the youthful Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564). (**fig. 1**) This work is taken as the introductory hermeneutic vehicle by which to examine, sometimes even contextually reassemble for the first time,

crucial Renaissance evaluations of “Inspiration.” Once established, the sometimes odd evolution of the Inspiration-motif is next tracked to its root-cellar in Greek thought, then subsequently traced, step by step, into our own modern, even post-modernist, moment. *Inspiration*, like any other figure of speech, is a trope; that means that it is a cultural construction. Like the various values attached to “Inspiration,” cultures are likewise specific to a given time and place. Shift the geography and adjust the chronology, and thereby is transmuted the conventional significance variously to be accorded *Inspiration*—and perhaps it even disappears altogether.

As initially argued here, Michelangelo’s exemplary sculpture concretely illustrated a then recently evolved—pagan-classical plus Christian-medieval—synthetic interpretation of “Bacchus.”⁴ The Bacchus of the Renaissance was not treated solely as a standard classical mythological figure, that is, the god of wine, but ever more as a sort of generic idea symbolizing the divine force once understood to propel the creative imagination. As such, Michelangelo’s *Drunken Bacchus* represents timely but largely singular mythographic innovations current in, but mostly unique to the Italian Renaissance. For the novel thesis that Michelangelo’s sculpture was intended to exemplify newly posed questions of artistic creativity, particularly the concept of “divine inspiration” derived from a metaphorical state of “noble intoxication,” along with other contemporary documents the Neoplatonic scriptures of Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) provide essential evidence. The Dionysiac metaphor of “ecstatic,” even “intoxicated,” *Inspiration* was thereafter to become a standard trope, that is, a persuasive creation-myth in its own right.

In the course of this book, I will, however, introduce recently acquired scientific evidence arising from controlled psychiatric inquiry and clinical research. These new findings establish that the popular, and also the traditional, scholarly conception of the role of “inspiration” in the creative process is—therefore, has nearly always been—flawed and misleading, in short, incorrect. That revisionist assessment also fits in with my role (or psychic burden) as a postmodernist art-historical observer: I view the rose with world-colored spectacles.

⁴ For wide-ranging perspectives over the Renaissance reception and evaluation of Bacchus, see Emmerling-Skala, *Bacchus in der Renaissance*; Gesing, *Triumph des Bacchus: Triumphidee und bacchische Darstellung in der italienischen Renaissance*; Screech, “The Winged Bacchus (Pausanias, Rabelais and Later Emblematis).”

However, since postmodernist “theory” has proved to be mostly confabulating, especially since it typically operates from an anachronistic, *a priori* position, it has been largely avoided here.⁵ It is instead appropriate that the written arguments interpreting the textual and visual phenomena discussed here revert to an ancient mode of discourse appropriate to the period when those notions of “inspiration” initially evolved. According to the classical and medieval *ars dictaminis* (or art of rhetorical discourse), the implicit structure of a judicial dissertation should be divided into five parts. First comes the introduction, an *exordium* or *proemium*. Next follows the main body of the argument. This comprises the second element, the *narratio*, that is, a narrative exposition of the facts in the matter. The third essential component is the *argumentatio* or *probatio*, that is, a recitation of the physical evidence. This is complemented by a fourth element, the *refutatio*, a running refutation of opposing opinions, and as demonstrated by the various *evidentia* sequentially presented in the *argumentatio* or *probatio*. The final, fifth, component is the closing argument, the *peroratio* or *epilogus*, providing resolution to the foregoing: *Quod est demonstrandum*.⁶

The same expository procedures also apply to the conventionalized format structuring the modern detective story, and what follows is indeed a narrative of detection applied to the history of ideas. The historian has been well advised to act like a “detective.”⁷ The formula for the modern detective story was established in 1888 with the publication of Arthur Conan Doyle’s *A Study in Scarlet*. The operating assumption presented there holds that scientific analysis can explain all human behavior. As stated by Sherlock Holmes, the process is called “reasoning backward,” and this deductive process he compares to the ability of a student of prehistory to reconstruct an antediluvian creature from a single bone. Like a contemporary Darwinian evolutionist, Holmes would begin with a given physical effect; from this, he then “reasons back” to the chain of past events that caused it. By examining its various traces, the significant “clues,” the detec-

⁵ For an anthology of model examples, with these serving to satirize all such trendy confabulations, see Phake-Potter, *Postmodernist Deconstruction for Dummies* (see also pp. 253–56, “Religion”).

⁶ For the historical continuity of such interpretive schemes, see Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*.

⁷ On this procedural issue, see Winks, *The Historian as Detective*. I am also most grateful to the writers and producers of “Law and Order” for giving me a rhetorical (forensic versus theoretical) model to follow.

tive reconstructs the history of past events as representing a logical pattern. The progressive discovery of material evidence enables the detective—also the historian—to explain the otherwise inexplicable. The detective-historian is confident that if one looks close enough at the material world, by scrutinizing its artifacts and its written documents, the obscure secrets of the human psyche will be revealed, and their previously hidden pattern will be disclosed.

But the first step is to establish the context of current conventional wisdom, meaning the way it still mostly shapes our elastic modernist (also *post*-modernist) view of “Inspiration.” Having done that, then, like assiduous archaeologists, we may proceed diligently to exhume its distant genealogy, in Antiquity itself. And then we may witness its decisive transformation in the Renaissance, and subsequent chapters carry its ever-evolving story through the nineteenth century, and then, once again, back into our own, ever troubled, “modernist” times and places. As it turns out (unfortunately), after the chilling events of September 11, 2001, we can all now benefit from a timely dose of possibly therapeutic *Inspiration*.

PART I

“INSPIRATION”:
ANCIENT DIONYSUS TO THE HUMANISTS’ BACCHUS

CHAPTER ONE

THE MODERN CONDITION OF “INSPIRATION”

“Self-Expression”: A Modernist Perspective on “Inspired” Creation

The appointed task of the historian (even of art) is to recreate, *à la mimesis*, the textures of a lost world, one entombed in the past. Although now a commonplace notion among sensitive modernists, it turns out that one of the missing links is the idea of “Inspiration.”¹ Even though some of the spiritual legacy of the Renaissance is still with us, for there are at least some reshaped relics still left over from that expressive syndrome called here the “Dionysiac heritage,” the living, sentient body has long since vanished, leaving behind only its bare bones: some of its architecture, writings, paintings, sculpture. Ours is a different age, one we call “modern”—just as the Renaissance occasionally dubbed itself *moderno*. We are entombed within our own modern age, made captives of its expectations and prejudices, its material advantages and disadvantages, its selective historical memory and its spiritual malaises. These are the given, mental-environmental, conditions. Metaphorically, they are like spectacles, distorting

¹ Unfortunately (and somewhat curiously), as yet there exists no comprehensive historical study of “Inspiration,” particularly as it is examined here in a more or less chronological exposition. As broad contextual guides for what immediately follows, the more useful secondary sources have included: Abrams, *Mirror and the Lamp*; Barasch, *Theories of Art, From Plato to Winckelmann*; Bundy, *Theory of Imagination*; Bundy, “Invention and Imagination in the Renaissance”; T. Clark, *Theory of Inspiration* (mainly covering the post-Enlightenment era); Harding, *An Anatomy of Inspiration* (anecdotal accounts, and mostly covering the nineteenth century); Harvey, *The Inward Wits*; Heninger, *Sidney and Spenser*, esp. 140–46; Kemp, “From Mimesis to Fantasia”; Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*; Kris and Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist*, esp. 38 ff.; Kristeller, “Modern System of the Arts”; Laski, *Ecstasy*, esp. ch. 26, “Inspiration”; Lee, *Ut Pictura Poësis*, 23 ff. (“Expression”); Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, esp. 51–108; Martindale, *The Rise of the Artist*; Nahm, “Theory of the Artist as Creator”; Nahm, *Artist as Creator*; Nahm, *Genius and Creativity*; Neumann, *Mitos de artista*; Osborne, *Aesthetics and Art Theory*, esp. 200–24; Schweitzer, “Der bildende Künstler und der Begriff des Künstlerischen in der Antike”; Summer, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art*, 103 ff.; Wittkower, *Born Under Saturn*; for the overtly occultist employment, a largely modernist phenomenon, see Shepard, *Encyclopedia of Occultism*, 466–67, “Inspiration.”

lens, shaping our sometimes inquisitive vision of the past, one aspect of which is here eloquently represented by Michelangelo's *Drunken Bacchus* (fig. 1).²

Artistic or not, we notoriously live in an age of "self-expression." As it turns out, the notion, even before the phrase itself, had been around for some time. In an influential book published in 1914, *Der Expressionismus*, Paul Fechter defined recently emerging German Expressionist art in terms of spirituality, Nordic personality, and an emphatic emotionalism then said to be due to an overriding "Will to Expression" (*Ausdrucks wollen*), a term advanced in 1908 by Wilhelm Worringer in his *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (so complementing Alois Riegl's earlier use of *Kunstswollen*, "will-to-form"). But there was a much larger purpose here; the expressionist painter, Fechter says, serves as the medium, like a lightning-rod, for the expression of the "world's soul." More particularly viewed, this was both a "modern" and an "abstract" art, and when this specifically modernist kind of abstraction was brought into being at the hands of a committed painter like Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), it was then pushed to its culmination in what Fechter called "painterly self-expression."³ Thus was the provocative term "self-expression" usefully situated within a site-specific pictorial context of both modernism and abstraction, two mental conditions which would, at first glance, appear wholly alien to Michelangelo's *Bacchus*. Moreover, Fechter has broadly defined for us the mainly "expressive impulses"—*Ausdrucks wollen*—of what I call "Orthodox Modernism." And, considered in its own right as a distinctive art-historical microcosm, since around 1910 Orthodox Modernism has itself been consistently postulated upon desirable traits of spirituality, personality, and generally overwrought emotionalism.

² On Michelangelo's *Bacchus*, particularly see Tolnay, *Michelangelo I*, 89–90, 142–45; Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, 177–90 ("A Bacchic Mystery by Michelangelo"); Hibbard, *Michelangelo*, 37–43; for the broader context of this work's setting and patron(s), see Lee, "Gardens and Gods." For confirmation of the chronology of the *Bacchus*, Summer 1496 to Summer 1497, additionally stressing the fact of its initial commission from a cleric, Cardinal Riario, and not the banker Jacopo Galli (*pace* Condivi), who did however *later* acquire it, see Hirst, "Michelangelo in Rome"; for the *Bacchus* among other works of this period by Michelangelo, see Hirst and Dunkerton, *Making and Meaning: The Young Michelangelo*; and for more bibliography, see Barrochi, *Il Bacco di Michelangelo* (a 28-page pamphlet).

³ Fechter, *Der Expressionismus*, 25: "malerische Ausdruck der Persönlichkeit"; for other contemporary readings of *Ausdruck-Expressionismus*, see Gordon, "Origin of the Word 'Expressionism'."

Thanks to the research of Donald E. Gordon, we now know that the term "Expressionism" was certainly not coined by the Germans. We now recognize the syndrome to be initially a French innovation, specifically a mental invention of the fin-de-siècle Symbolist movement (about which we shall have much more to say, in chapters 8 and 9). As Gordon has shown, current in the studio of Gustave Moreau at the École des Beaux-Arts between 1891 and 1898 was the term "self-expression," and this is what he encouraged his students to practice, including Henri Matisse and other future "Fauves." The term *l'Expressionisme* was also used around 1908 by Louis Vauxcelles, the same critic who later gave us *le Cubisme*. The term *fauves*, of course, means "wild beasts," corresponding to a term commonly used by vanguard German painters to describe themselves—"Die 'Wilden' Deutschlands"—long before Fechter popularized the new denomination, *Die Expressionisten*.

That term, *Expressionisten*, was however already employed in April 1911, as a label for an exhibit in Berlin that featured the art of (among others) Henri Manguin, Albert Marquet, André Derain, Kees van Dongen and Maurice Vlaminck—painters otherwise known to us today as "Fauves." In May 1912, Richard Reiche stated that vanguard Germans were seeking radically enhanced "forms of emotional expression"—*Ausdrucksformen*. That German artists first thought of the vanguard *French* painters as having priority as "self-expressionists," but which they did not consider themselves as yet, is indicated by Kandinsky's observation about Picasso: "Always guided by his compulsion for self-expression [*Selbstäusserungszwang*], often even tempestuously driven, Picasso flings himself from one expressive means to another [*von einem äusseren Mittel zum anderen*]."⁴ A native German denomination of an "art of emotionalism" (*Ausdruckskunst*), already used by Alois Riegl (*Stilfragen*, 1898) and Theodor Lipps (*Asthetik*, 1903), was turned by Fechter into a French neologism, "Expressionism." After 1914, in short, "self-expression" became something like an official doctrine and soon evolved into a notion broadly marking truly vanguard art, modernism itself.

But the mythic realm of ubiquitous self-expression, to which we so routinely acquiesce today, only really applies if we happen to dwell in the so-called "First World"; elsewhere, the primary interest is a

⁴ Kandinsky, *Ueber das Geistige in der Kunst*, 31.

full belly. Quite to the contrary to the interests of Third World inhabitants, within our “advanced,” uniquely privileged and fully nourished, intensely urbanized, international capitalist-consumerist culture, the drive for fulfillment of desires towards self-expression is presently institutionalized. In fact, the doctrine of self-expression is customarily instilled as early as nursery-school. Since even lay-people are now made to feel that they are entitled to their diminutive dollop of self-expression, the situation is obviously magnified exponentially amongst those who actually fancy themselves “artists,” and there are many, many more self-designated *artistes* now attempting to practice their creative mission than had ever been remotely imagined previously to be accommodated upon our planet.

For instance, according to Robert Hughes, “today, according to the best statistics I can find, 35,000 painters, sculptors, potters, art historians and so forth graduate from the art schools of America *every year*: this means that every two years this culture produces as many art-related professionals as there were people in Florence at the end of the Quattrocento [when Michelangelo’s *Bacchus* was conceived]. Does this mean that we have a new Renaissance? Of course not. It means that we have a severe unemployment problem at the bottom and an exaggerated star-system at the top of the artist population.”⁵ With these kinds of numbers, such daunting odds, how can such institutionally certified “artists” ever proclaim their uniqueness? Formerly, the remedy was called “Inspiration.” It is now, however, by means of ever more self-expression (*Ausdruckskunst*), particularly the brand routinely taught to sensitive youths in provincial art schools, a kind of pedagogically convenient caricature of painterly pseudo-Angst which may be jocularly called “I-Gevalt [!] Neo-Expressionismus.” One wonders what Paul Fechter would make of it all . . .

Fundamental to what may be called the *orthodox* modernist (versus “post-modernist”) position on creative artistic activity, which still remains synonymous with *self-expression*, is the perhaps surprisingly *ancient* concept of “Inspiration.” According to the corresponding texts,

⁵ Hughes, *Nothing If Not Critical*, 401. According to (necessarily) informal surveys, by five years after their graduation, probably only 5–10% of all art school diplomats (BFA or MFA) are still devoting significant time to producing “art” (versus doodling while on the telephone). Since, apparently, over 90% of these officially certified “artists” drop art-making nearly as soon as they leave school, and strive instead for economic autonomy, what does this tell us about the pertinence, and actual educational performance, of the American Art-Education Industry?

modern or ancient, this is a privileged gift; it is only bequeathed to a few, and then only the very particularly favored, *individuals*. According to once universally reigning orthodox-modern doctrine, those people—the majority—who remain un-inspired cannot, no matter how hard they may try, really ever arrive at the creation of artistic marvels. In other words, *Inspiration* (not a college diploma) is what fundamentally separates the certifiably “real” artists from the thronging masses of ordinary folk and/or would-be artists. For want of this indispensable endowment, *Inspiration*, the deprived ones (supposedly) feel envy and frustration in the face of real “talent.” It is a mysterious gift; like *bona Fortuna*, you either have it—or you just don’t get it. Whatever we choose to call this distinguishing mental attribute, the acknowledged triggering impulse to unique creativity, it points to a larger sociological distinction. Just as was recognized by José Ortega y Gasset back in 1925, “The modern artist divides the world into two classes of individuals: those who understand [modern] art and those who don’t; this means, there are [now] either the artists or those who aren’t.”⁶

Although capable of infinite verbal expansion, the basic American, coast-to-coast, college art department party-line can be, even today, compressed into a famous oracular pronouncement rendered by Clement Greenberg (1909–1994), way back in 1962. In one of his widely cited essays, called “After Abstract Expressionism,” one wondered, then as now, “what irreducibly constitutes *good* art as such.” Your guess was probably wrong; according to Clement Greenberg, “the worked-out answer appears to be: not skill, training, or anything else having to do with execution or performance, but conception alone.” As employed in this usage, “conception” is a new term, so to clarify the context of its more familiar connotations, we learn from Greenberg that “conception can also be called invention, *inspiration*.” Ah, there is *the* key term, the one that we shall have to pursue vigorously to its historical root-cellar.

Certainly, this was also a very important term for Greenberg, and by his reckoning, “*Inspiration* alone belongs altogether to the individual [or ‘self,’ as in ‘self-expression’]; everything else, including skill, can now be acquired by any one. Inspiration remains the only factor in the creation of a successful work of art that cannot be copied or

⁶ Ortega y Gasset, *La deshumanización del arte*, 23: “El artista nuevo divide al público en dos clases de individuos: los que lo entienden y los que no lo entienden; esto es, los artistas y los que no los son.”

imitated.” Although no doubt Greenberg thought that his was a novel insight, the historian knows better. As Michael Baxandall reminds us, ever since (at least) the Quattrocento, “*ars* was the skill or competence that was learnt by rule and imitation, so *ingenium* [‘genius,’ itself regarded as particularly receptive to *inspiration*] was the innate talent that could not be learnt:’ . . . *ars erit quae disciplina precipi debet* [stated the Roman rhetorician Quintilian] *ingenium, vis, facilitas et quidquid arte non traditur* [‘craft shall be considered that discipline which demands learning rules, but no art is ever forthcoming without genius, strength and facility’].”⁷

Immediately afterwards however, we are given to understand by Greenberg that this distinctive kind of late modernist “Inspiration” does not deal with any kind of significant narrative content, religious, political, or even amorous. Instead, as he tells us, only “the *exact* choices of color, medium, size, shape, proportion—including the size and shape of the support—are what alone determine the quality of the result, and these *choices depend solely on inspiration or conception*.”⁸ According to Greenberg, *all* the significant twentieth-century masters of non-objective painting had derived “their chief inspiration from the medium they work[ed] in.” Hence, their *only* “preoccupation” had been “with the invention and arrangement of spaces, surfaces, colors, etc., to the [dogmatic] exclusion of whatever is not necessarily implicated in these [strictly formalistic] factors.”⁹ *Au contraire*: clearly, this is an art-historically invalid conclusion (and just as that point will be demonstrated, particularly in Chapters 8 through 11).

Another dissenting argument may be quickly presented. The overriding preoccupation “with the invention and arrangement of spaces, surfaces, colors, etc.,” with a concomitant “exclusion” of any kind of significant narrative content, is also the generally defining characteristic of a *quilting party*, where the artistic “medium” is (merely) cloth. I know about this kind of contemporary creative endeavor, since I have often been a bemused witness to these creative-social gatherings. But why were are such textile-based creative encounters excluded from Greenberg’s high-modernist canon? Most likely, because nearly inevitably the participants are *women*. For Greenberg, as it appears, the only legitimate “modern artist” is a *man*. Moreover, this inspi-

⁷ Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators*, 15.

⁸ Greenberg, as quoted in Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory*, 767–69; emphasis mine.

⁹ Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, 7.

ration-driven man implicitly works in solitude. So doing, he shows himself to be "alienated." Since women are sociable creatures, by definition they are not alienated. Ergo, even though typically abstraction-centered, their unquestionably pleasure-driven, creative activities can not be labeled "art" by Mr. Greenberg. *Quod est demonstrandum.*

Since it is a recognized fact that Greenberg's statements once exerted a tremendous influence on vanguard artists, thus we are dealing with a verbal artifact, in effect, an admonition of unquestioned art-historical significance. Therefore, whatever your opinion may be regarding his wholly formalist conclusions, obviously any exhaustive historical exegesis of Greenberg's key term—"inspiration"—should prove useful to a heterodox archaeology of the orthodox creation-myths currently defining modern art-making and, particularly, its codified verbalization or rhetoric.

The Mythology of the Modern Artist

There has long since been a "Mythology of the Artist," and the *mythos* of "Inspiration" is central to the enduring legend. As Rudolf Wittkower pointed out some time ago, "Art critics agree that certain marked characteristics distinguish the artist from 'normal' people. The 'otherness' of artists is also widely accepted by the general public [and] there is an almost unanimous belief among them that artists are, and always have been, egocentric, temperamental, neurotic, rebellious, unreliable, licentious, extravagant, obsessed by their work, and altogether difficult to live with. Art historians have contributed relatively little to this discussion."¹⁰ But we all know this to be true, especially since: "I saw it at the movies!"¹¹ This "otherness" is also the standard stuff of the artists' biographies, a literary genre which was largely invented in the Renaissance, an age notoriously dedicated to exaltations of the individual ego,¹² particularly its unique by-product, "genius."¹³ Structurally, and most interesting, the real prototype for

¹⁰ Wittkower, *Born Under Saturn*, xix.

¹¹ For a useful analysis of cinematic artist-mythologizing, see Walker, *Arts & Artists on Screen*.

¹² The topic was essentially set in place in 1860; see Burckhardt, *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*.

¹³ The most useful monograph known to me describing the historical evolution of this mythic construction unfortunately remains untranslated; see Zilsel, *Entstehung des Geniebegriffes*; but see also Murray, *Genius: The History of an Idea*.

the Renaissance contribution was a medieval pedagogical staple, the “Lives of the Saints” (*Vite dei Santi*). Those hagiographic exercises were in turn based on an ancient literary genre, biographies of “The Hero.”

As we learn from a classic study of literature and myth embraced by New Age acolytes—Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949)—all genuine heroes of folk tradition are the multiform expression of “truths disguised for us under the figures of religion and mythology.”¹⁴ Following Freud, Campbell explained that all heroes are in effect expressions of a greater mono-myth. The heroic literary genre nearly invariably includes the following three liminal passages through the universal life-course: “(1) separation or departure; (2) trials and victories of initiation; (3) return and reintegration with society, in short, the ultimate triumph and vindication of the hero’s life and labors.” In a similar fashion, the standard artist-biography, then and now, basically adheres to the same conventions and additionally rests upon two complementary supplements. As described by Catherine Soussloff, these are: “(1) anecdotes about what the artist has been purported to have done in his historical reality, including issues of physical appearance, dress, and interactions with other individuals, most especially patrons and other artists, and (2) the description of the works of art [called] *ekphrasis* providing an ideal rhetorical form for insertion into the chronological narrative structure of biography.”¹⁵

In a fascinating and significant overview of “The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist” (1993), Donald Kuspit reminds us of the currently entrenched role of the “modernist artist as the symbol of heroic resistance to all that is oppressive and corrupt in bourgeois civilization,” with the standard result now being “an adulatory fetishization of the artist as such,” and that worshipful response is “classically modernist.” Resting on laurels garnered since the Renaissance, “in sum, the myth of the avant-garde artist involves the belief that he is *initiated* into the mysteries of primordial experience, that he is more spontaneous—primordially expressive—than anyone else.” A key component of this mythically proportioned, “initiated” creator-mentality is, Kuspit states, a conventionally invoked “mysticism of the [artistic] medium,” which “induces hallucinatory images,” allowing the ecstatic artist “to fuse

¹⁴ Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 11.

¹⁵ Soussloff, *Absolute Artist*, 33. For further extrapolations from the classic, typically anecdotal, *Kunstliteratur*, see Kris and Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist*; Schlosser, *Literatura Artistica* (originally titled *Kunstliteratur*), and Wittkower, *Born Under Saturn*.

symbolically with the medium," due to his unique "kind of habitual intoxication." This is the legendary stuff about which, among others, Greenberg so frequently spoke. It also smacks of the familiar religious condition known as "possession."

Although we shall find much earlier, specifically "Bacchic," sources for such notions of creative *initiation*, especially the kind characterized by "habitual intoxication," Kuspit assigns major responsibility to Friedrich Nietzsche. He was an influential German philosopher who, well over a century ago, described at some length the role of "the artist-healer," and especially the function of his "aesthetic state as one of hallucination or hallucinatory exaggeration, brought on by self-intoxication." And, says Kuspit, before Nietzsche, there was "Friedrich Schlegel's conception of artists as 'Brahmins, a higher caste: ennobled not by birth but by free self-consciousness,' and 'at the threshold of things'." Kuspit believes, and with good reason, that such commonplace poses have long since "become a farce." The "farce" becomes even more exposed to public ridicule by what follows here, showing exactly why, and how long ago, such egregious presumptions became conventional affectation.

More particularly, Kuspit acidly observes how avant-garde allegiance represents an identifiable "belief system," one which psychologically aligns itself with membership in (non-artistic) *cults*, another ubiquitous modernist social phenomenon. Both kinds of spiritual tribes, or what Kuspit calls "charismatic groups," either Occultists or Artists, reveal, as he notes, the following "psychological elements" in common: "(1) a shared belief system, and (2) they sustain a high level of social cohesiveness, (3) are strongly influenced by the group's behavioral norms, and (4) impute charismatic or sometimes divine power to the group or its leadership." Such "ideological totalism," committed to what Kuspit calls "milieu control," commonly employs "mystical manipulation or planned spontaneity." Likewise, both kinds of tribal expression are characterized by "the demand for purity and the cult of confession." Other standard operational features observed by Kuspit to inform the cult of orthodox-modernist creation-myths are "sacred science," "the loading of the language," and "the principle of doctrine over person."¹⁶ The intention in what follows is to situate exactly,

¹⁶ Kuspit, *Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist*, 1–14. For a detailed analysis of these "belief-system" phenomena, presented in the forensic format of a case-study focused upon a single, much lionized, avant-garde artist, Joseph Beuys, see Moffitt, *Occultism in Avant-Garde Art*.

as best as one can (but as Kuspit and others have not yet done), the often distant historical sources and subsequent evolution of many of these issues, particularly the initiatory, mystical, induced spontaneous, and auto-intoxicated components—all summed up in the magical shibboleth *Inspiration*.

For some art historians, especially those who do not fancy themselves “modernist specialists,” current academic analyses of the generally anti-literary imagery characterizing modern art may often appear oddly “a-historical.” This perception holds especially true for that ever more obsolescent breed of art historian trained in the traditional rigors of “scientific” scholarship, *Kunstwissenschaft*. These scholars avoid fashionable (hence transient) theoretical impositions and instead typically focus on iconographic investigations of the contemporary evidence for literary content informing obscure pictorial cycles from the Renaissance or Baroque periods. For these stalwarts, there is a curious quality about much research in modern art, perhaps even an apparent bias. Since it rarely has anything to say about any significant *pre*-modernist ideological predecessors, it is as though art conceived after 1900 owes no meaningful mental lineage to, perhaps has never even heard about, any significant cultural manifestations occurring before, say, 1850. It might appear (for instance, to a Martian) as though the unquestionably distinctive “modern” pictorial syndrome had invented itself (*à la Deus ex machina*) single-handed just prior to the 1914–1918 War; hence, it seems as though its very being was due to a nearly extraterrestrial feat of painterly parthenogenesis.

Part of the problem has been—at least, until rather recently—that narrowed, scholarly focus upon a wholly “formalistic” explanation for the genesis of modern art, particularly the visual “look” of its painting. Even though largely discredited by currently entrenched *post*-modernist dogma, *orthodox* modern critical doctrine (as exemplified by Greenberg) usually maintains that avant-garde artistic “mastery” is unique to each individual Master (but evidently not to a “mistress”). It further holds that artistic significance has been best signified by earnest signs of often tortuous artistic labor, especially as “self-expressed” by agitated paint-marks and gestural homogeneity: *Ausdrucksformen*. These perhaps quaintly old-fashioned orthodox scriptures would have it that a painting is (just) quintessential “paint” before it can be anything else: it is thereby taken to express the “values” of Art through “the medium” of its “syntax” alone. Unquestionably, modern imagery

does not really *look like* anything which had ever preceded it in the history of art. Nonetheless, just as in real life, in art history *looks* aren't everything . . .

"Modern": A Brief History of a Loaded Word

The first myth of modernism to be exposed, but only briefly, is the very notion of the contemporaneity supposedly inherent to the term "modern." The word itself, as it turns out, is not so "modern" after all.¹⁷ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the Latin word *modernus* surfaced (at least) as early as the sixth century, and perhaps the late Roman scholar-statesman Cassiodorus (490–583) should be credited with its momentous invention. By that time, *modernus* evidently represented an opportune conflation of *modo*, "just now," with *hodiernus*, meaning something like "today-ish." Even today, "modes," whether profoundly "artistic" or merely "fashionable" (which today may often mean the same thing), are judged, as such, to be valid only "today," or "just now."¹⁸

Previously, during the Hellenistic era, for want of *modernus* the equivalent word was νεώτερος, and thus Aristarchus of Alexandria contrasted *neoteroi* poets with Homer, "an ancient" (or *archaios*, *palaios*, *antiquus*, *vetus*, *priscus*, and so forth.); Cicero, making the same temporal comparison, later translates—and up-dates—the first term into Latin as *poetae novi*. Cassiodorus's terminology was soon given a historical application in the ninth century, when the age of Charlemagne was called the "*seculum modernum*." This terminology conforms to a strictly Christian temporal dichotomy, the fundamental distinction drawn between the *Vetus Testamentum* and the *Novus Testamentum*. This Christian mentality also gave birth to a now-standard period terminology: Antiquity, Middle Ages, Renaissance, and so forth, all of which are historical concepts foreign to the so-called Classical era.

¹⁷ What follows on the pre-modern sources and evolution of the term "modern" is derived from (besides the *OED*) Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, 251–55; Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, 186–225; idem, *Renaissance and Renascences*, 25, 33–35; Schlosser, *Literatura Artística*, 100, 128, 279–84 (Vasari); Eitner, *Neoclassicism and Romanticism*, II, 69–82, 153–63 (Ruskin and Baudelaire).

¹⁸ For the definitive, cultural-commercial installation of modernist "modishness" during the Symbolist era, see Williams, *Dream Worlds*.

The first strictly “artistic-plastic” application I know of pertaining to the word “modern” (and of course there may be earlier ones I have missed) was *opus modernum*, meaning “the modern work,” and that was used to describe that once-modern, or contemporary form of architectural expression which we, today, call “Gothic.” Its other contemporaneous terminology was *opus francigenum*, meaning “the Frankish work,” so geographically situating its genesis in the Île de France (see **fig. 20**). Such “Gothic” architecture was still styled as “modern” by il Filarete (Antonio Averlino) in his *Trattato* (perhaps finished as late as 1464), where he juxtaposed that *maniera moderna* to the competing “classical” *maniera antica*. Moreover, in various textual sources, and manifested as well in many surviving buildings erected during the sixteenth century in Spain (and in Mexico as well), “Gothic” ribbing and vaults continued to exemplify *la architettura moderna*. However, in Italy during the Quattrocento—the very age and place where premonitions of autonomous artistic self-consciousness (and maybe even some self-expression) first feebly stirred—the Gothic style was more commonly referred to as a despised, for being perceived as foreign, *maniera tedesca* (“German manner”), but the alternative term *gótica* for such building also appears occasionally, and with similar pejorative connotations.

It seems that the first *individual* artist to be dubbed as being specifically “modern” (and even in our modern sense) was Giotto di Bordone (ca. 1264–1337), and this pioneering lexical designation is due to Cennino Cennini (in his *Libro dell’Arte*, ca. 1390), who observed how this talented Florentine painter usefully “transformed art to modernism” (*ridusse l’arte al moderno*). In this case, “*moderno*” referred to Giotto’s “newness,” which he acquired by rejecting the reigning “*maniera greca*,” or Byzantine style, substituting for it relative naturalism and an incipient sense of perspective. Another writer, Filippo Villani (in his *De origine civitatis Florentiae*, ca. 1400), specified that, by doing so, Giotto “surpassed his predecessors in art and genius” (*Giottus . . . antiquis pictoribus comparandus sed arte et ingenio preferendus*). In this instance, Giotto’s praiseworthy *ingenium* was already tacitly understood to be “instilled,” and nearly “innate,” particularly as the root is the verb *gignesco-genitum*, “to engender.” “Modern” is first globally used as a period-term, and in order to encompass the whole of (then) contemporary art, by Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574), who calls the creations of his time, later Renaissance “Mannerism,” “*il moderno si glorioso*” (*Vite*, revised edition of 1568: introduction to part IV). Somewhere

between 1500 and 1520, the term was initially used in English, and likewise to designate positively something like a contemporary situation, as in John Dunbar's *Poems* (no. 85): "*Hodiern, Modern, Sempitern, Angelicall Regyne!*"

However, for *us* (postmodernists all), "modern" art, and especially its typically "radicalized" theoretical biases, properly appears to represent a meta-artistic, or mostly "politicized," historical phenomenon needing an explicitly "revolutionary" model or format, perhaps even the French Revolution of 1789. As early as 1800, Mme. de Staël boldly proclaims that Republican culture requires a similar "revolution" in its literature, and the *Journal des Débats* explicitly announces in 1815 that artistic Romanticism is the direct offspring of the political Revolution. In 1827, Victor Hugo enumerates the virtues of modernism, so further defining Romanticism as being focused upon problems of *l'humanité*, dynamism, variety, and even ugliness (*le laid*). In this case, *le laid* is presented positively as the contemporary counter-reaction to *le beau*, meaning that Ugliness functions as a kind of anti-classicism fighting against the tyranny of academic art, itself standing for Beauty (*le beau*).¹⁹ But this is nothing really new, for it echoes the old "Quarrel Between the Moderns and the Ancients" (*querelle des anciens et des modernes*) that so occupied the attention of French *académiciens* beginning in the seventeenth century, and enduring for some time thereafter.

After that epochal event of 1789, it seems perhaps only natural that, even outside France and beginning in 1843 (and culminating in 1860), John Ruskin (1819–1900) would begin to publish his polemically titled volumes on *The Modern Painters*. Here, the basic argument held that his contemporary compatriots (British, and so politically stable) had *surpassed* the old masters (non-British, and so emotionally unstable), in this case with specific regard to such "timeless values" as truth to nature, beauty, and (even) moral significance. Something like a near-final step is presented by Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), who, besides worshipping art, advocates a moment-specific purpose, the historical present, for elucidation by *l'art moderne*. In his "Salon of 1845," he therefore celebrates the "heroism of modern life [which] surrounds and presses upon us. . . . The true painter for whom we

¹⁹ P. Mainardi, "The Political Origins of Modernism," in Tomlinson, *Readings in Nineteenth-Century Art*, 72–82.

are searching will be the one who can seize the epic quality of contemporary life [...] grant us the extraordinary joy of celebrating the advent of *the new!*" For Baudelaire, *l'art moderne* is as much a matter of style as of subject matter, the latter being addressed to contemporary issues, particularly the sort arising from urbanism.

As these statements make reasonably clear, although its core issues may have shifted in their emphases, at least since the Renaissance "modernism" has existed as a viable concept. Then as now (particularly since Baudelaire), it seems to signify a portentous, somewhat confused, yet unmistakable, collective self-consciousness focused upon the individual's temporal isolation within a given historical moment. As also seems apparent from this kind of documentary evidence, the psychology informing an evolving historical conception of strictly artistic "modernism" was, and from the outset (with Giotto), often directly linked to an apparently perennially self-conscious, cultural construct: "the Genius."²⁰ Additionally, then as today, the self-identified modernist condition is paradoxically at once self-doubting and self-congratulatory. Viewed from this exalted belvedere of "the present," previous achievements metaphorically diminish in size (or value) according to the proportionate postulates determining Renaissance perspective constructions. Ordered by the rigid logic inherent to geometrical conceptualization, such a compositional system—"perspective"—established both proportionate distance in space and, by implication, distance in time, that is, from everything not taken to be *hodiernus*, which is likewise "here" and "now." Then as today, one scales the heights of modernity by using previous traditions as graduated stepping-stones, and each earlier rung progressively descends backwards in time and also in relative value. Any ambitious ascent from the discarded "before" is now, that is since the Renaissance, conventionally called "progress."²¹

²⁰ The best historical studies known to me dealing in detail with this European cultural icon, the "Genius" (sometimes even artistic in expression), are by Edgar Zilsel, *Geniereligion; Entstehung des Geniebegriffes*. For the convincing argument that Postmodernism now takes particular umbrage at "the cult of individual genius," particularly as epitomizing "creativity, originality and individuality," see Dunning, *Roots of Postmodernism*, esp. ch. 14, "On the Shoulders of Giants."

²¹ For a broader view of that optimistic concept, now largely discarded by the postmodernists, see Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*; for the strictly art-historical evolution of the term, see Gombrich, "The Renaissance Conception of Artistic Progress and its Consequences," in his *Norm and Form*, 1–10. For further, typically glum, ruminations about the contextual definitions of the term (and conditions of) "Modernism," either orthodox- or post-, see the texts presented in Frascina and Harris, *Art in Modern Culture*.

From Orthodox Modernism to Postmodernism

Such is, *in nuce*, the historiographic background for a self-definition of Orthodox Modernism, particularly as an "attitude," a self-fashioning pose. But we now live in a text-ridden, attitudinizing, "*post*-modernist" age of cultural *bricolage*.²² In brief, and particularly as exposed in the arena of the visual arts, the anti-orthodox *post*-prefix suggests that potential for further "Progress"—which had been the basic ideological postulate supporting all those "radical," sequentially evolving, pseudo-scientific pictorial "experiments" defining typically "revolutionary" orthodox modernist "formal research"—are now exhausted. This conclusion is reflected in currently popular art-critical models: the Marxist and dialectical, the semantic and the structural.²³ Overall, these hermetic inquiries ignore obsolescent orthodox-modernist questions of "originality" and "uniqueness." Instead, their focus (which is also often mine in this investigation) is upon the imagist and presentational *categories*, and the inter-related socio-cultural context of *generation* (by artists) and *reception* (by consumer-critics).

Blessed with historical hindsight, we now recognize that the first visual signs of consistent attempts to escape from Orthodox Modernism appeared in the decade leading to 1968, incidentally a momentous date marking both the height of the Vietnam imbroglio and also the death of Marcel Duchamp (b. 1887–1968). This was also an explosive decade in which state universities in America first began to produce large troops of young art critic-historians and diploma-toting artist-experimenters. Academically trained, as future teachers operating within the same kind of institutional setting: the public university, these artistic acolytes will become the founders of a permanently entrenched, literally "academic," institutionalization of the Avant-Garde. A nearly immediate result was that, after that point, art-making was

²² For a useful picture-text survey of the changes described here, ca. 1960 to 2000, also nicely situating the cultural impulses lurking behind each artistic mini-manifestation, see Taylor, *Avant-Garde and After* (also including a useful bibliography). For the documentary evidence for postmodernist expression, see for instance various important critical essays and source-texts dealing with the fine arts assembled in Cahoone, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*; Risatti, *Postmodern Perspectives*; Smagula, *Re-Visions: New Perspectives of Art Criticism*; Stiles and Selz, *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*; Tono Martínez, *La Polémica de la Posmodernidad*; see also Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory, 1900–1990*, esp. 987 ff.

²³ For a deliciously on-target satire of currently trendy, academic "critical" writing, see Phake-Potter, *Postmodernist Deconstruction for Dummies*.

no longer *fun* to do. Henceforth, it all had to be theoretically endorsed, become “critically” *self-conscious*. That makes sense; art criticism has always been the essential accomplice, if not actual creator of modern art.²⁴ All this tendentious seriousness inevitably came along with the often oppressive patronage of the higher-educational *Kultur-Industrie*, and universities have, since the twelfth century, typically identified their higher mission with the production of speculative, highly specialized (and perhaps little read), scholastic-philosophical, exegesis. Then it was neo-scholasticism, and now it is post-structuralism: *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*.

These fustian years—1958 to 1968, sequentially birthing Pop, Minimal, and Conceptual Art—also produced a potent progeny of “anti-art” staples and rhetorical conventions: in-jokes, hip refusals and perverse affirmations, the juxtapositions of culturally and visually dissonant styles, diverse (low- to high-brow) media-imagery, ephemeral happenings, found objects, junk-materials and junk-ideas, and so forth. All such manifestations could all now be globally re-named: “art.” Overall, the move was *away* from, “post-,” what had been the routinely accepted, bourgeois-cultural, orthodox convention. The discarded convention had exalted the ineffable visual experience of *unique* artworks, tangible objects uniquely wrought by trained individuals, “professionals,” seriously (ever so) committed to self-expression—*Inspiration* with *Ausdrucksformen*—expressed through a given, traditionally sanctioned, artistic medium. *A bas l’art traditionnel!* In retrospect, the collective proto-PoMo *Kunstswollen*, as initially manifested during the 1960s, generally rejected Tradition, namely narrative concerns, communication skills, manual ability and technical mastery. Implicitly it did so mainly in order to repudiate a traditional or reigning (OrthoMod) exclusionary and/or elitist myth: the belief in personal quality and individual style as the primary means of designating a necessarily manually skilled, “Inspired Genius-Artist.”

The single art-historical, quasi-deity legitimizing all that earnest nominalism was Marcel Duchamp.²⁵ One of his major contributions to thinking about art was his commitment to a sense of *irony* (which has also influenced my thinking about modernist creative phenomena).

²⁴ For a case-study approach validating this particular argument, see Roskill, *Klee, Kandinsky, and the Thought of Their Time*.

²⁵ For what this endlessly influential artist was really pursuing, see Moffitt, *Alchemist of the Avant-Garde*.

Another major contribution was essentially material. Beginning in 1913, Duchamp began producing a series of "Ready-Mades." Considered objectively, these were industrially manufactured, commercial products, the *anonymous* relics of modernist mass-production. These were additionally anomalous artifacts elevated, as Duchamp put it, to new heights of "aesthetic consideration" merely by the "choice of the mind," Duchamp's, "not by the ability or cleverness of the hand." Although we really can not exhume exactly what Duchamp himself meant by all this, on one level the real reason for the sheer *popularity* of such haphazard productivity after 1968 seems perfectly obvious. As implicitly understood by the *post*-Duchamp generation, since you need only *choose* a ready-made object, apparently you need no manual skills whatsoever, and scarcely any discernible brain-power. This I know for a fact: I have myself enjoyably made several ready-mades (i.e., I've been there; done that). To do so, evidently you don't even need to experience "Inspiration" (at least not the emotionally overwhelming sort of *Inspiration* recorded in the ancient texts I shall cite). After 1968, self-designated "artists" (myself included) have proclaimed (endlessly) that anything encountered in or out of the gallery-museum, be it physical or even wholly dematerialized, could, under certain conditions of production and display, verbally qualify as "art." Lines drawn on the ground, crumpled newspapers, empty boxes, xeroxed documents, a pile of dirt, filing cabinets, a sheet of printed instructions, a live performance in three-and-a-half minutes; just name it and, already by 1968, it is "art": *nomen est omen*. In this case, the conventionalized historical precedent (ca. 1565) is obvious, *transubstantiation*: just name the wafer—*et ecce Corpus Christi*!

The specific historical locus of a present-day, host-like elevation of the Duchampian *beaux gestes*, and specifically his markedly mythic "ready-mades," is largely the result of a recent collusion: the literal integration of the art-school within the bureaucratic embrace of the public university. The noticeable, literally visible, results are some significant professional loss of purpose exhibited by the former, art-schools, which were formerly independent vocational training-shops for future makers of commissioned visual arts, and with no noticeable *quality* gain for the latter, the state-supported institutions of "higher learning." Nonetheless, the Higher Education Industry certainly has significantly increased the sheer *quantity* of its captive fee-paying customers, students. Robert Hughes has recently drawn our attention to an ensemble of concrete "factors contributing to the

decay of the fine-arts tradition in American schools in the sixties and seventies.” Foremost among these “was the increased attachment of art teaching to universities, which meant that *theory* tended to be raised above practice and making. Thinking deep thoughts about [art] histories and strategies was [made] more noble than handwork, and it produced an exaggerated drift toward the conceptual.” More than any other father-figure, the posthumous legend of Duchamp has made him into the very incarnation of what Hughes calls “the disembodied, the conceptual, the *not there*.” Particularly as fueled by the reigning Duchamp myth, “for nearly a quarter of a century,” Hughes trenchantly observes,

late-modernist art teaching (especially in America) has increasingly succumbed to the fiction that the values of the so-called academy—meaning, in essence, the transmissions of disciplined *skills* based on drawing from the live model and the natural motif—were hostile to “creativity.” This fiction enabled Americans to ignore the inconvenient fact that virtually all artists who created and extended the modernist enterprise between 1890 and 1950, Beckmann no less than Picasso, Miró and de Kooning as well as Degas or Matisse [but not counting Duchamp], were formed by the *atelier* system and could no more have done without the particular skills it [formerly] inculcated than an aircraft can fly without an airstrip. . . . Whereas thanks to America’s tedious obsession with the therapeutic, its art schools in the 1960s and 1970s [and ever since] tended to become *crèches*, whose aim was less to transmit the difficult skills of painting and sculpture than to produce “fulfilled” personalities. At this no one could fail.²⁶

A new situational ethic emerged during the 1970s, what I would call the “tribalization” of the avant-garde. Still responding to a by-now thoroughly conventionalized ethos of opposition to the Establishment initially set in place by Vietnam, this was the decade that brought us, additionally, Watergate and OPEC, events which, besides causing widespread economic distress, revealed to nearly everyone just how spiritually bankrupt the standard, utopian and universalist, orthodox-modernist belief-systems and political institutions actually were. This is when the standard (old-guard) vanguard mentality began frequently to be defined—negatively—in terms of gender. Next, the *orthodox* modern kind of self-expression (Picasso to Pollock, et al.) was now roundly condemned, that is, for symbolically belonging to a recently

²⁶ Hughes, *Nothing If Not Critical*, 11–12.

discredited colonial system, a "patriarchy"—a predominantly white, heterosexual and male, culture—where both the producers (artists) and consumers (audience) are understood to be *that way*. An additional sub-premise, ubiquitous since ca. 1970, is that formerly lionized, painterly "expressiveness" had been exclusively an orthodox, *male* prerogative; also anathema was a newly emblematic "male gaze." Expanding well beyond gender issues, a new "pluralism" emerged and became the heterogeneous mouthpiece for a dissenting, and thoroughly fragmented, but ever expanding, series of post-colonial, vanguard mini-cultures.

This rhetorically rearranged avant-garde largely represented a culture of complaint. It was particularly plagued by the burden of historical and theoretical self-consciousness. The burning questions, as separately posed by various groups of self-designated "outsiders," were ideological and didactic, politicized "discourses"; these were mainly focused on social (or extra-pictorial) issues and "strategies" of, initially, gender and, above all, Power. The uniform insistence was put on Difference (Jacques Derrida's *différance*), and each micro-component was applauded for its verbal production of self-reflective, theoretical or self-defining, intellectual position papers, "analytical critiques." A major focus for debate was "authorial," dealing with the presence or (more typically) the absence of authenticity and crafted surfaces, critical intention and desperate originality; in short, it was really about *Inspiration*. But, after all, how could you really do anything "original" in an age of mass-media? Omnipresent, the mass-media irrepressibly showed you that *everything* had, in fact, already been "done." Flatulent in its verbosity, each vanguard mini-tribe carefully defined its own "representational systems" as manifested by ingeniously polemical, neo-Duchampian "gestures." Sometimes, even something merely visual might actually be generated, and then it was named: "Art." But in order for that to *be* art, so it was said, it must have "critical depth," in practice meaning that it must be difficult rather than entertaining, oblique rather than condescending, gnomic rather than nice.

These systems of polarizing dialectics implicitly rewarded good verbalization, not necessarily any unique (and intractably mute) pictorial qualities. But, above all, it was all very hard to keep track of just what *was* happening. In fact, visually the scene changed with the rapidity of the fashion industry, likewise having its strategic center in Manhattan. As in the Rag Trade, exposure in the Media—however

fleeting—signified fame, “celebrity,” perhaps even artistic significance, but surely also the presence of capitalistic drive and consumerist appetites. In short, a formerly monolithic, orthodox vanguardism had become fractured into coeval hosts of typically hostile, tribal sub-units, each with its own rhetorical mini-agenda. The art-historical results—now forgotten for the most part (that is, except by art historians)—included Minimalism, Formalism, Post-Minimalism, Process art, Earthworks, Scatter Works, Neo-Primitivism, Neo-Expressionism, Neo-Conceptualism, Performance and/or Body art, Video, Photo-Realism, Installations, Appropriations, Information Theory, Simulationist art, Situationism, Commodity Art, Neo-geo[metrical] painting, Slack art, and so forth. Each was essentially an earnest attempt to illustrate the reigning *théorie du jour*. All this feverish activity belongs to a rigidly institutionalized, thoroughly media-saturated, context in which art is “represented” (*simulated*) in a world of multi-national commercial interests, image-enhancement sponsorship, competitive governments, proliferating museum building, publicity-(and profit-) generating journals, tenure-track careerist academic aggrandizement, even cultural tourism. In short, it’s all gotten thoroughly business-like, *industrialized*.

Déjà vu: way back in that decisive year, 1968, the death-knell of the avant-garde (but only one of several following) had already been sounded by Harold Rosenberg (1906–1978), an *orthodox* champion of the “heroic” kind of modernist self-expressionism made (in)famous by the so-called “Abstract Expressionists,” especially Jackson Pollock (see **figs. 22, 23**), an energetic individual especially driven by *Inspiration*. In 1968, of course, the Cold War, including a very hot one in Vietnam, was at its height; then one had a purpose in life, a positive mission, a recognizable “Other” to confront and overcome. Working within this aggressively committed mental ambiance, Rosenberg then defined in useful detail the traditional (since ca. 1860), or strictly *orthodox*, understanding of the “heroic” avant-garde condition and its missionary agenda:

An action is *not* “avant-garde” without an ideology to characterize it. Vanguard art tends to sketch the outlines of a dogma, or a set of convictions. The ideology comes first and shapes the action, as well as accrediting it. Ideology, the blueprint of end and means, precedes creation, is the basis of creation. Those who are looking for avant-gardes are looking for a convinced crowd. Besides being collective and ideological, avant-gardes are by nature combative. Each is bent on destroy-

ing its predecessor, and each stands on guard against being replaced by newcomers. Intellectual do-or-die makes art a serious pursuit and keeps it from degenerating into mere craft. The first quality of avant-garde art is newness; *avant-garde art is art not seen before. But the embodied idea always remains the product of an individual.*

Now comes Rosenberg's requiem for the now-obsolescent *orthodox* position, the kind based on the notion of that unique "product of an individual," he who lives for "revolutionary" self-expression—his "inspiration":

With the door to politics closed by totalitarianism [meaning evidently both Soviet and "Free World" totalitarianism], art has to an increasing degree affirmed its dissociation from political and social purpose. In the ideologies of recent [1968] art movements, art-historical reasoning has been offered as a substitute for consciousness of [political] history. In this parody of vanguardism, which revives the academic idea of art as a separate "realm," art can make [so-called] revolutionary strides without causing a ripple on the streets or in the mind of a collector. Not content with renouncing radical aims, the new academic vanguard casts suspicion on the social and intellectual radicalism of past vanguards. In the current rewriting of art history, the interest of advanced artists of the past—in nature, science, action—was [just] a pretense disguising the will to contribute to problems of [pictorial] form. Cut off from the will to change the world, art today, whatever its merit, is not [genuinely] avant-garde, and its claims of affiliation with the vanguardism of the past are a sham exploitation of the radical tradition.²⁷

Ergo, likewise obsolete is the *orthodox* modernist notion of *individual* self-expression, a process implicitly postulated upon uniquely empowered receptions of timely gusts of "inspiration." Also obsolete, or at least largely forgotten, is the interesting manner by which such notions of individually privileged *inspiration* actually came to be so stubbornly associated in European culture with the strictly visual (versus literary) artist, so making him—and in *that* gender—into a culturally licensed, even prestigious, paragon of that creative endeavor presently called "self-expression" (and, formerly, *Ausdrucksformen*). Unless we understand this, we postmodernists remain ignorant of the *raison d'être* behind our contemporary plethora of desperate pseudo-philosophical

²⁷ H. Rosenberg, "Collective, Ideological, Combative," in Hess and Ashbery, *Avant-Garde Art*, 80–92; emphasis mine (even though, for the sake of economy, I have omitted inserting ellipses in quoting this material, nonetheless the statements are all Rosenberg's).

speculation about the values and expectations of art itself, *se ipsum*.

In short, whence came this now necessarily disparaged style of self-expression? In order to clarify the evolution and significance of the *idea*, which being such (an “idea”) is largely abstract in nature, we need to personify “Inspiration,” to give it a human face and form, so treating it as though it were an allegorical figure. Accordingly, the first half of this study focuses mainly upon a little discussed, early work by Michelangelo, his *Drunken Bacchus* of 1496–7 (see **fig. 1**). Our investigation will aptly conclude by citing a typical post-modernist image of Michelangelo, in this case one made by Barbara Kruger (see **fig. 26**), and the artist’s stated purpose was specifically to attack “the myth of the divine inspiration of the genius.” As always, form follows function (and it is the *function* which really calls for probing, perhaps even “inspired,” analysis).

CHAPTER TWO

MICHELANGELO'S *BACCHUS* AS A HISTORICAL METAPHOR

An Interpretive Context for Michelangelo's Bacchus

What follows reads something like a detective-story treating a case now over five centuries old. In this instance the figurative *corpus delicti* is the tipsy *Bacchus* carved between 1496 and 1497 by a youthful but ambitious Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564), then at the very outset of his long and increasing successful career as an independent artist.¹ (**fig. 1**) Our primary intention now becomes a progressive revelation of the intrinsic significance informing this particularly striking artwork. The first applicable context, and especially befitting its time and place: Florence and Rome around 1495, is to call this the work of a “humanist artist.”

Since the designation “artist” seems not to need any further definition, then what do we mean when we call somebody a “humanist,” and at that very moment in time? Erasmus of Rotterdam was one of them, and he succinctly defined his vocation: “*Nos vetera instauramus, nova non prodimus*—we restore old things; we do not produce new ones.”² In this case, the *vetera* specifically referred to the cultural wonders of Antiquity, embracing both literature and visual art, and such as these were described in Greek and Latin texts, and what we now call “the humanities” was then referred to as a *studia humaniora*, in practice meaning a close inspection of the documents from the classical past.

Besides maintaining now mostly obsolete attitudes of belief in the inherent dignity of man and in the values of rationality and freedom, the humanists were cultural historians. As historians, they shared procedural traits with another type of professional investigator, but one only later to emerge, the *scientist*. Both kinds of researchers start

¹ For current scholarship on this artwork, see chapter 1, note 2.

² Erasmus, as quoted in E. Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, 4.

with observation and move from that to analysis. Whereas the modern scientist treats human records (“history”) as tools, the Renaissance humanist treated them as both precious relics and as objects of interest in their own right. While the modern scientist can embark upon an immediate analysis of an object, the humanist had first to reconstruct it mentally, and he did so both on the basis of other related objects and on the supposed intention of its maker.

The poet Ludovico Ariosto (1474–1533) neatly defined the mostly textual basis of the artistic canons of his age, namely by conjuring up a list of famous artists—even though none of their esteemed works had ever actually been seen by his contemporaries! In this case, the hypothetical canon of artistic excellence includes the likes of:

Timagoras, Parrhasius, Polygnotus, Protogenes, Timantes, Apollodorus, Apelles, more famous than all the rest, and Zeuxis, along with the others of that age, whose reputation, thanks to [similarly ancient] authors, shall remain always alive in the world, so long as man reads and writes—*sempre starà, fin che si legges e scriva mercé degli scrittori [antichi], al mondo viva.*³

A complementary purpose served by this investigation is to illuminate the kind of emblematic significance typically to be attached by Michelangelo’s better informed Renaissance contemporaries to *any* kind of artfully conceived “Bacchus” (or Dionysius) partaking of current philosophical concerns.⁴ Another larger, and perhaps more important, objective is to examine the presence of innumerable Bacchic repercussions, appearing both during and long after the Renaissance, representing what I call the “Dionysiac heritage.” This Bacchic legacy is the one which largely shaped that “myth of the divine inspiration of the genius” which a sensitive postmodernist like (for instance) Barbara Kruger finds so offensive (see **fig. 26**). Even had Michelangelo never carved his skillful marble sculpture, we may still believe that the subsequent Bacchic chain of events in European artistic culture, now mostly forgotten and extending under different names well into the twentieth century, would have evolved in much the same way.

³ Ariosto, as in L. Barkan, *Unearthing the Past*, xxvi.

⁴ For a various views of the Renaissance reception and evaluations of Bacchus, see Emmerling-Skala, *Bacchus in der Renaissance*; Gesing, *Triumph des Bacchus: Triumphidee und bacchische Darstellung in der italienischen Renaissance*; Screech, “The Winged Bacchus (Pausanias, Rabelais and Later Emblematis).”

But first one must precisely situate the meaning of Michelangelo's *Bacchus*, in its own time and place. In this case, we need to recover the significance of the so-called "Humanist Mysteries," particularly such as these *Dionysia* were practised in Florence by intellectual aristocrats late in the fifteenth century. Then we must examine the role played by Michelangelo's most likely classical models. In this case, particularly important was the influence exerted by certain *lost* artworks imaginatively re-created during the Renaissance through rhetorical *ekphrasis*, verbal descriptions of long-vanished masterpieces as vividly recorded by various Roman and Greek authors. One of the most celebrated ancient sculptures was Praxiteles's *Dionysios* (ca. 340 BC), long since lost but treated by classical authors as an especially noteworthy illustration of "Bacchantic Frenzy," and so deemed potentially worthy of creative emulation (*mimesis-imitatio*) by Renaissance artists. Other kinds of significant literary evidence illuminating the Dionysiac phenomenon illustrated by Praxiteles's *Dionysios* includes a contemporary text, Plato's *Phaedrus*. This Platonic dialogue also later served to introduce frequent Renaissance discussions of the subject of "Melancholic Creation," itself reflective of an even older topic, the "Poet's Divine Inspiration." But well before then, the Middle Ages had already produced its own unique (but likewise now mostly forgotten) contribution to our investigation, the "Christian Bacchus." It was from that kind of "moralized" Bacchus that there subsequently arises a complementary topic, a "Reborn Bacchus, 'all'antica.'"

In both kinds of reinterpretations, medieval and especially the post-medieval, increasingly the figure of Bacchus was figuratively employed to illustrate a rather novel situation, "Neoplatonic Noble Intoxication." In the immediate intellectual milieu of Michelangelo, in Florence around 1490, this idea received its most detailed exposition in two Neoplatonic dialogues composed by Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*. Once we have recovered Bacchus's mostly forgotten post-classical literary career, we can next trace his symbolic progress as the new patron of "Creative Intoxication" in Renaissance mythology and emblematics. With the new interpretive perspectives acquired from this and other kinds of pertinent literary evidence, one then links contemporary discussions of Liberal ("Free") Art-Making and Beauty to Michelangelo's *Bacchus*.

The argument for the Liberal Arts was something like a burning issue for Renaissance artists; in fact, the successful resolution of that argument explains why today we even bother to call their ambitious

successors “artists.” In Antiquity, the image-maker had no societal status to speak of, for he had no “liberal” prestige. Working with his hands, rather than with his “freed” mind, he was a mere “craftsman,” *banausos*, a servant strictly obedient to the wishes of his employers. As such, a mere employee, he was no more considered worthy of accolades (or a fat salary) than was a cabinet-maker or mid-wife or, today, a plumber or automobile mechanic (or even a provincial university professor in the Liberal Arts). Clear symptoms of the emerging dichotomy can, however, be early identified in the precocious ruminations of Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) concerning the different implications of *Brauch* and *Kunst*, utilitarian “application” or non-utilitarian “art.” For this Renaissance artist, a newly posed question was to which discipline, *mechanice* or *liberales*, “mechanical” or “free and licentious,” did his pictorial production actually belong. Needless to say, such fine distinctions do not apply today to vanguard art-production: the battle for professional status and social prestige was won five centuries ago.

Having thus established the great cultural significance of a variety of meanings potentially attached to a noble figure like Michelangelo’s *Bacchus* during the Renaissance, the next task is to bring the ancient wine-god forward into time, directly to the threshold of the “heroic” modern age. Accordingly, first to be considered are some unquestionably influential discussions of Dionysus published after 1876 by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1899) in his widely read *Birth of Tragedy*. Then one examines the revived significance of Dionysus and Orpheus, his companion on Parnassus, particularly showing the way these Bacchic figures were interpreted slightly later by prominent Symbolist writers and artists, particularly in France. This allows us to perceive how the Renaissance kind of Bacchic “Ecstasy” had been opportunely revived by the Symbolists, and these were the theorists who also first advanced, around 1890, the enduring idea of an unprecedented “modern” and “abstract” kind of painting. As we saw, they were also the precocious champions of “self-expression.”

We will find that very much the same kind of “Dionysiac Ecstasy” was being exalted by the so-called “Formalist” art critics around 1912, just when they were championing the vanguard cause of even more radically conceived “abstract painting,” the kind based on “pure form.” Contemporary employment of other kinds of traditionally Bacchic metaphors led to another important phenomenon, the commonplace acceptance of an archetypal orthodox-modernist *topos* (“rhetorical

topic," or even cliché), that is, the conjoined "Artist-Priest-Prophet." The process was already initiated by Michelangelo, especially once he was labeled "divine" (*divino*) by adoring contemporaries. Still very much with us, we find that the initial installation of this commonplace staple of avant-garde legend, the archetypal Artist-Priest-Prophet figure, was clearly the work of the French Symbolists, and as abetted by their compatriots, the Rosicrucian and Theosophical Occultists. Among these, Éliphas Lévi was a particularly eloquent champion of esoteric "initiation" into the "magical arts."

This odd cultural symbiosis between Occultists and Symbolist art-theorists directly gave birth to a decisive link in the chronologically extended Bacchic chain of events, the Dionysus of the French Surrealists, a figure now become identified with the creative, often frenzied, "Unconscious." Today the Dionysiac heritage is still alive and well, especially in the creative labors of often politically activist artists burdened with a priestly "shamanic" mission which they ritually reenact in their so-called "performance art." The catalogue of these emblematically inspired Artist-Priest-Prophet figures includes such well remembered modernist luminaries as Antonin Artaud and Joseph Beuys, and also a thronging host of other players with more ephemeral reputations subsequently exploiting their posthumous legacy.

Michelangelo, Mimesis, and the Humanist Mysteries

In order to probe various complementary contexts illuminating the contemporary significance of Michelangelo's *Bacchus*, new evidence will be presented here for its likely impetus in *imitatio*, a plastic artistic corollary to literary *ekphraseis*. Although the notion of "Imitation"—or *mimesis*—is truly ancient, it was eagerly contracted for the purposes of Renaissance Humanism.⁵ In his standard history of literary criticism, Willaim Wimsatt traces the origin of the interpretive term to Plato's passing use of *mimesis* (μιμησις) in *The Republic* (Book III), where it was observed that certain poems, dramas, actually "imitate" what happened, and these are the most dangerous for their "mimed" passions prove contagious to the audience. In Book X, Plato puts *mimesis* into another pejorative aspect, and the painter, acting as a

⁵ See Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis*, esp. 9–16, "Imitation."

mere “imitator,” is denied the status of “a creator,” and since even “the tragic poet is an imitator,” he, too, is “twice removed from the truth.”⁶ Aristotle also treated *mimesis*. In the *Meteorology* (IV, 3), he makes the famous observation that “Art imitates Nature” (*hé techné mimeitai tén physin*), specifically in the sense of “filling out what nature leaves undone” (*Politics* VII, 17). As put in the *Physics* (II, 8), “Art finishes the job when nature fails, or imitates the missing parts.” For later generations however, the most important statement on *mimesis* appears in the *Poetics* (I, II): the object of poetic imitation must be “men in action,” their charactes, deeds, and passions (*éthé-praxeis-pathé*).⁷ As Neus Galí points out, the term derived from the verb *mimeisthai*, with that meaning “to incarnate or impersonate, that is, to assume the personality of another or other persons.”⁸

As, however, practiced in the Renaissance, “Imitation” meant, according to Sem Dresden, “a kind of homage paid to the model, which at the same time proved that the imitator [Michelangelo in this instance] was capable of something similar”; moreover, “the theory of divine inspiration was [then] nearly always coupled with *imitatio*” by the Florentine Humanists.⁹ The idea of the *exemplar*, an instructive aesthetic “model,” is a specifically Roman contribution to the Hellenic idea of *mimesis*. Its most influential spokesman was Horace, and it was he who spoke of “those Greek models which you must have at hand and engage yourself with, day and night” (*Ars poetica*, 268–9: “*vos exemplaria Graeca nocturna versate manu, versate diurna.*”).¹⁰ According to our argument, not only did Michelangelo intend to emulate those *exemplaria Graeca*, indeed even to surpass the works of the Ancients in general—just as his contemporaries do attest—but

⁶ Wimsatt, *Literary Criticism*, 11–12.

⁷ Ibid., 26–27; for a fuller account of historical applications of the term in literary practice, see the classic study by Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*.

⁸ Galí, *Poesía silenciosa*, 105.

⁹ Dresden, *Humanism in the Renaissance*, 177; see also 11–107, stressing, in an accurate but concise manner, the peculiar character of that “*pia philosophia sive docta religio*” characterizing creative Florentine scholarship during this period. For “*imitatio*” in the literary theory of the Italian Renaissance, setting the pattern for similar discussions in contemporary art theory, see Gombrich, “The Style ‘all’antica’: Imitation and Assimilation,” as in his *Norm and Form*, 122–28; see also Auerbach, *Mimesis*; Green, *Light in Troy*; Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis*; Rivers, *Classical and Christian Ideas in Renaissance Poetry*; Ulivi, *L’imitazione nella poetica del Rinascimento*; Weiss, *Renaissance Discovery of Classical Antiquity*; Wimsatt and Brooks, *Literary Criticism*.

¹⁰ Horace, as in Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis*, 17; Wimsatt, *Literary Criticism*, 82.

also to compete individually with the artistic achievement of one especially well regarded ancient sculptor, Praxiteles, himself the author of an often commented-upon *Dionysios*.

These premises illuminate the complementary issue of this sculpture's reception, meaning how the subject matter of Michelangelo's *Bacchus* might have been evaluated by learned Renaissance contemporaries, even if they did so in a manner essentially foreign to standard, classical period, perceptions of the ancient wine-god, Bacchus or Dionysus. According to the way he was frequently (re)interpreted by slightly later mythographers and emblem-writers, what emerges is a Bacchus largely unique to the Renaissance, one who had been transformed into a humanist *topos* (or standard rhetorical figure) worthy of serious analysis in its own right. Most of the distinctive features of the Dionysus reborn in the Renaissance were developed in Florence after 1480. As imaginatively reshaped mainly under Neoplatonic influences, Bacchus then became an emblematic mythic figure standing for creative inspiration in the arts. Another element defining a new, obviously post-classical, kind of Dionysus was Christian symbolism. This was a logical accretion at the time of Michelangelo's *Bacchus* and, moreover, it is a contributory factor which might actually have been actively encouraged by the original patron of this ambitious sculpture, Cardinal Raffaello Riario. More to the point, a symbolically charged but standard type of Christian Bacchus had already been advanced by late medieval mythographers, most notably Petrus Berchorius.

Admiring contemporaries frequently stated that Michelangelo felt inspired to outdo antique sculpture.¹¹ Such professional competition, an ambitious rivalry then often described as an urge to "surpass" the masterworks of the Ancients (an archetypal purpose already attributed to Giotto), would have been encouraged as much by Michelangelo's apparently innate hubris as by his distinctive, at once aristocratic

¹¹ For Michelangelo's consistent ambitions to compete with, and even surpass, antique sculpture, see, in general, Clements, *Michelangelo's Theory of Art*, esp. ch. 3, "Neoclassical and General Theories," 131 ff.; for his revived, classical-intellectual milieu, see also Summers, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art*, esp. 262–68 (ch. 18: "Greek Painting"). Whereas both authors cite various contemporary statements to this competitive effect, David Summers particularly stresses (as I do) Michelangelo's sources in the essentially legendary, and probably exclusively *textually* transmitted materials. For the broader historical context for all such attempts to "surpass" one's professional predecessors, see Gombrich, "The Renaissance Conception of Artistic Progress and its Consequences," in *Norm and Form*, 1–10.

and scholarly, cultural milieu. The nature of Michelangelo's youthful intellectual orientation in Florence under Medici patronage was peculiar; as P. O. Kristeller reminds us, "this was a literary culture, or to use the terms of the period, a rhetorical and poetical culture, as well as a classical culture nourished by the study of the ancient Greek and Latin authors." This was a text-driven, rather nostalgic, culture that set out to renovate, at times even surpass, its ancient models. It was particularly Marsilio Ficino and his Neoplatonic circle who, Kristeller adds, "dominated Florentine intellectual life during those decades that go from the death of Cosimo de' Medici in 1464 to the revolution of 1494."¹² The moment of Ficino's intellectual domination also coincides exactly with the period of Michelangelo's intellectual formation in Florence. This was, moreover, a Neoplatonic culture very much involved with the "Mysteries," pagan rites signifying a process of ecstatic "spiritual initiation" (in Greek, *myeisthai*) of a kind that was directly associated by Florentine Humanists with the ancient Dionysiac *mysteria*.

The elitist or exclusionary intellectual milieu belonging to what Michelangelo's learned contemporaries labelled their *pia philosophia sive docta religio* ("a pious philosophy and/or learned religion") is perhaps best summed up by Pico della Mirandola's characterization of one of his own, typically learned and recondite commentaries. In his exegesis of Benivieni's *Canzona d'amore*, Pico observes that the intended results, "will be intelligible only to a few, for it is filled with many mysteries extracted from the secret philosophy of the ancients."¹³ Here (as in his other writings) it appears that Pico had in mind the famous tag from Plato's *Phaedo* (69 B), "many are called, but few are chosen," but which more accurately reads in the Greek, "many are the bearers of Bacchic-wands [*thyrsoi*], but few are genuinely Bacchic [*bacchoi*]." According to Edgar Wind, Plato's thyrsus-bearing *Bacchoi* specifically signified "true philosophers," and the greatest Renaissance works of art, particularly those created in Florence under

¹² Kristeller, "Platonic Academy of Florence"; for a more recent study emphasizing the role of Neoplatonism as an important influence for Florentine artistic circles in this period, see Bredekamp, "Götterdämmerung des Neuplatonismus," in his *Lesbarkeit der Kunst*, 75–83.

¹³ Pico, as quoted by Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, 10; for Pico's commentaries as, equally, Ficinian doctrine and as a likely source for Michelangelo, see Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, 145, 179.

Medici patronage, as Wind also observes, appear to have been “designed for initiates; hence they require an initiation.”¹⁴

An important cultural matrix for this new Bacchus representing “initiated” Divine Inspiration was a peculiar kind of metaphysical, even religious, classics-based Humanism which enthusiastically assimilated (or tamed) pagan mythology into Christian culture. Specifically it did so, Kristeller remarks, “by attributing to the pagan stories a hidden meaning that was in accordance with Christian truth; this attitude culminates in Pico della Mirandola’s notion of a ‘poetic theology’.”¹⁵ Pico’s observations, among other pertinent source materials, will be quoted in their specifically Bacchic applications in order to show how the revived antique subject of Michelangelo’s youthful masterwork (**fig. 1**) was likely read by his Florentine contemporaries in their post-classical or Christian, “modern” context.

According to Michelangelo’s biographer, Ascanio Condivi, since as early as 1491, when he was only sixteen and an apprentice-resident in the Casa Medici, the youthful artist had already been moved to rival, if not actually outdo, famed antique monuments.¹⁶ Standard written sources known, and some actually composed, in Florence towards the close of the Quattrocento (or elsewhere in Italy shortly afterwards) permit identification of certain new meanings assigned at that time to the subjects of renowned ancient sculptures. Since none of these works actually survived the Middle Ages, their posthumous fame was entirely literary in form, and so their putative appearance and significance became subject to much embellishment, in both ekphrasis and in pure legend. These descriptive texts helped define Michelangelo’s early strategies for approximating, even surpassing, the essentially legendary sculptural productions of Antiquity. In the case of Michelangelo’s most successful youthful attempt at a *mimesis* of Antiquity, the *Bacchus* of 1496/7, an interpretive reconstruction of its probable contemporary significance necessarily requires close textual analysis of various contemporary Dionysiac meanings. Briefly put, in the Renaissance the attributed significance of Bacchus could be either positive (creative inspiration) or negative (potential self-destruction).

¹⁴ Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, 4, 15; for the alternative readings of *Phaedo* 69 B, see also *Great Dialogues of Plato*, 472, n. 3.

¹⁵ Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought II*, 39.

¹⁶ For a shrewd appraisal of Condivi’s role as Michelangelo’s compliant mouth-piece, see Barolsky, *The Faun in the Garden*.

But this *Bacchus* was not Michelangelo's first attempt at *mimesis*. According to both Condivi and Giorgio Vasari, a direct impetus for the young sculptor's precocious recreations of ancient art and classical subjects was Angelo Poliziano (1454–1494), a poet-dramatist, pioneering translator of Greek classics, accomplished mythographer, and the learned resident-tutor of the Medici children.¹⁷ Condivi informs us that Poliziano was “a most erudite man, as his writings amply attest,” and he adds that specifically it was Poliziano who initially “spurred [Michelangelo] in his studies, always explaining things to him and giving him subjects. One day, amongst other themes, he suggested ‘the Rape of Deianeira’ and ‘The Battle of the Centaurs,’ telling him in detail the whole of the story.”¹⁸ Both abductive episodes had been drawn from Ovid (*Metamorphoses*, 9:101 ff.; 12: 210 ff.), also later narrated by Giovanni Boccaccio in his widely consulted *Genealogiae*.

In this instance, obviously it was Poliziano's pointed citation of the second nymph-inspired *Centaureomachia* pictured by Ovid (in Book 12 of the *Metamorphoses*) that inspired, around 1492, Michelangelo's so-called *Battle Relief*, which may now more accurately be labeled a “Rape of Hippodame.”¹⁹ (fig. 2) Emphasis on the new title seems necessary since some scholars still seem a bit confused in this regard. Nonetheless,

¹⁷ The idea of Poliziano as an (un-named) author of prominent Florentine artists' subject-matter has been long since discussed by modern scholars, a trend beginning in 1893 with Aby Warburg (“Sandro Botticelli's ‘Geburt der Venus’ und ‘Frühling,’” Leipzig, 1893; rpt. in *Rinascita del Paganesimo Antico*, 1–58); see also Gombrich, “Botticelli's Mythologies,” in *Symbolic Images*, 31–81; Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, 113–27, “Botticelli's Primavera”; Dempsey, *Botticelli's Primavera and Humanist Culture* (both Wind and Dempsey usefully point up the essential character of this painting as an ekphrastic exercise). For the most developed (to date) discussion of Poliziano in specific relation to the young Michelangelo, see Summers, *Language of Art*, 242 ff.; see also Seznec, *Survival of the Pagan Gods*, 114.

¹⁸ Condivi, *Michelangelo: La vita raccolta*, 18–19 (calling Michelangelo's choice of Ovidian subject matter either “il Ratto de Deianira [sic. ‘Hippodame’] [or] e la zuffa de' Centauri”).

¹⁹ On Michelangelo's *Battle Relief*, particularly see Tolnay, *Michelangelo I*, 77–78, 133–36; see also Hibbard, *Michelangelo*, 22–25. Seznec, *Survival of the Pagan Gods*, 114 (n. 123), relates Michelangelo's *Battle of the Centaurs* to Poliziano's description of similar reliefs, sculpted by Vulcan and placed on the “Palace of Venus,” as described in his *Le Stanze per la Giostra del Magnifico Giuliano dei Medici* (1475–8), Book I, Stanzas 97–119 (according to the text given in Poliziano, *The Stanze*, 50–61). For a (to me unlikely) political interpretation of the *Battle Relief*—as “Liberty (Hercules) Overcoming Tyrants (Centaurs)” —see Lisner, “Form und Sinngehalt von Michelangelos Kentaurenschlacht.” The a-political approach would merely cite Pliny, in this case on sculpted *Centaureomachia*, for one historical context (among others) suitable to Renaissance enlightened patronage.

Ovid himself clearly identifies the abducted maiden appearing in the center of Michelangelo's relief-panel as "Hippodame"—not as "Deianira" as Condivi stated—and even the rock-throwing Lapith at the far left is named by the Latin poet, as "Charaxus."²⁰ Moreover, as Vasari additionally observed, by itself Michelangelo's bas-relief technique (*mezzo rilievo*) represented an accurate and deliberated imitation of Antiquity. Thus we know that, from the outset of his artistic career, Michelangelo's mimetic exercises embraced recreations of as much classical *form*—the style or actual visual look of antique art—as well as a close approximation to its ancient *content*—the thematic material actually expressed in classical literature.

The methodology behind Poliziano's way of "always explaining things" to young Michelangelo would have been the kind of historicist criticism reiterated in his *Miscellanea* (1489), a collection of one-hundred expanded textual annotations. Each of Pico's topics appeared in a given classical text, and each was rigorously dissected by scrupulously tracing and citing in ancient literature all possible sources, models, parallel passages, and potential allegorical applications. This kind of intense scholarly historical exegesis was likewise consistently built into Poliziano's poetical creations.²¹ Besides in the relief panel now relabeled the *Rape of Hippodame*, we might likewise suspect its hermeneutic presence in Michelangelo's *Bacchus*.

With the benefit of hindsight, a latent Dionysiac significance may now also be attributed to Michelangelo's *Rape of Hippodame* carved in 1492 (**fig. 2**). This context emerges from the standard Italian version of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* produced (ca. 1375) by Francesco Giovanni Bonsignori. Here the centaur was explicitly described as "overheated and intoxicated," as much by lust as by wine ("*damore & per ebbria de vino*"), and equally drunken and lusty centaurs ("*ebbri, & lascivi di lussuria*") were also cited by Boccaccio as pursuing Hippodame.²² As understood by admiring contemporaries, obviously Michelangelo's

²⁰ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 297–99.

²¹ For a usefully detailed exposition of Poliziano's conspicuously erudite "humanist historicism," which I attribute here to Michelangelo's youthful *ekphraseis* in sculpture, see Grafton, "On the Scholarship of Politian"; for Poliziano's *Panepistemon* (1490), putting his odd intellectual system—"inspired-theological, invented-philosophical, mixed-divinatory"—in outline form, see Ellenius, *De arte pingendi*, 63–68; Summers, *Language of Art*, 250–61 ("Panepistemon").

²² Bonsignori (*Metamorphoses*) and Boccaccio (*Geneologia*), as cited in Tolnay, *Michelangelo I*, 134.

relief broadly depicted a “Rape of Nymphs.” Accordingly, it seems perhaps a bit odd that modern scholars also fail to mention the conventional associations then drawn between *ratto* and *raptus*, commonly signifying (besides physical abduction) spiritual *rapture* or *transport*. This second significance, “transport,” or movement to strong emotion, commonly attaches to any nymphs, or other legendary beings, who are said to be “*rapti sunt*,” or “taken away,” that is, directly out of themselves, which is also the literal meaning of *ekstasis*, “ecstasy.”

As commonly discussed at that time by Florentine scholars studying the Dionysiac *mysteria*, those who are *rapti sunt* could be additionally read as signs of *hierogamia*—literally signifying “sacred marriage,” but also commonly meaning ecstatic union, spiritual rapture and/or divine translation.²³ Given this situation, most likely Poliziano’s explanations to Michelangelo of the Ovidian rape-scene were, besides exegetical, additionally couched in the common contemporary Neoplatonic vocabulary of Rapture. This was a three-part scheme explained by Ficino as comprising either “*conversio-raptio-vivificatio*” (conversion-transport-rebirth) or “*emanatio-raptio-remeatio*” (emanation-rapture-divine union).²⁴

Michelangelo, Pliny, and Ekphrasis

As a useful factual source for Poliziano’s painterly recreations of classical vignettes—and so also applying to Michelangelo’s *imitazione* in an antique bas-relief format as well—there was likely an additional, indeed canonic, textual inspiration. For Florentine humanists, the multi-volume *Historia Naturalis* by Pliny the Elder (AD 23–79) represented a nearly inexhaustible encyclopedia of Roman Antiquity. As recent scholarship acknowledges, no text fascinated the humanists more, from the fifteenth century onwards, than did Pliny’s *Natural History* and it remained for them the richest source of information about the arts in antiquity.²⁵ In one of many informative art-historical

²³ For the historical context of this terminology, “Hierogamy,” see Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, 42 (n. 24), 155 ff.

²⁴ Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, 37–38.

²⁵ For a variety of specific information on Pliny’s importance, see Barkan, *Unearthing the Past*, 66–117. However, his discussion of Michelangelo’s *Bacchus* (201–5) makes no mention of Pliny.

passages, the *Natural History* in fact puts just such a "Battle of Centaurs" figuratively into a context of, equally, art, history, and particularly enlightened patronage, *all'antica*.

Certainly the *Natural History* was even taken by working artists to be a mine of essential professional information. For instance, Michelangelo's biographer Francisco de Hollanda observed how the Roman miniaturist Giulio Clovio and the gem-cutter Valerio Belli were wont to talk for hours about the wonders of ancient art, such as they exclusively knew them from Pliny.²⁶ By then, however, Pliny represented something like common knowledge for both humanists and even artists as well. An Italian translation of the *Natural History* made by Cristoforo Landino (an author well known to Michelangelo)²⁷ had been published in Venice as early as 1473, and, among others, Leonardo da Vinci is often cited as relying on this vernacular version of Pliny's standard art-historical text, or even, as I believe, another edition in Latin.²⁸ The practise is, of course, much older, for Pliny is well known to lie behind nearly every art historical parallel mentioned in Leon Battista Alberti's *De Pictura* (1435).

In the case of, equally, Michelangelo's *Centaureomachia*, and his *Bacchus* of some five years later, various passages in Pliny seem of particular contextual interest.²⁹ One refers (*NH* 36:33) to a notable Roman art-collector, Gaius Asinius Pollio (76 BC–AD 4).³⁰ Like Lorenzo de' Medici, for whom munificent artistic patronage was a chief instrument

²⁶ Francisco de Hollanda, *Dialogues*, IV, 123–25.

²⁷ Certainly well known to Michelangelo was Landino's neoplatonizing *Comento sopra la Comedia di Dante Alighieri* (Florence, 1481). Unfortunately, it contributes nothing to our Bacchic investigation, since Dante himself made only three miniscule references to the ancient wine-god: *Inferno* 20:59 (citing Thebes as birthplace of Bacchus); *Purgatorio* 18:93 (describing Bacchic followers "rushing" about); *Paradiso* 13:25 (where the songs of souls in Paradise are compared in passing to Apollonian and Bacchic choric precedents).

²⁸ For a particular illustration of this point, see (for instance) Moffitt, "Leonardo's 'sfumato'."

²⁹ For one author directly connecting the *Centaureomachia* to Pliny, see Barolsky, *The Faun in the Garden*, 66–67. The citations following conform to the Latin text, as given in Pliny, *Natural History in Ten Volumes*.

³⁰ It appears that no scholar has yet attempted to tie Michelangelo's sculpture, and also Medici patronage, to these passages by Pliny relating to Gaius Asinius Pollio and which are just cited here as broadly applicable "prototypes." I only advance this connection as a likely contributive, but most certainly not the determining, aspect of aristocratic Florentine patronage. For more ancient texts describing Asinius's famous art collection, see Stuart-Jones, *Select Passages from Ancient Writers*, 153, 164, 166, 210, 222–23.

of state policy,³¹ Asinius Pollio was famed as a scholar, a poet, a politician, and a patron of cultural activities. If not taken as a direct model, then Pollio would certainly have been seen as a significant historical parallel for enlightened Medici patronage. Pliny says that he, “being an ardent enthusiast, was accordingly anxious for his collection to attract sightseers. In it are the ‘Centaur Abducting Nymphs’ [*Centauri Nymphas*] by Arceilas,” among many other notable Hellenic works exhibited by Pollio.

We are also told that this most famed of all commoner Roman collectors also owned many marvellous works by Praxiteles, himself a celebrated, nearly legendary, Hellenistic-era sculptor (*NH* 36:20). Moreover, Pollio had in his possession a statue of *Dionysios* (Bacchus) by Eutychides (*NH* 36:34). Like Lorenzo, Asinius Pollio, as Pliny states (*NH* 35:10), “dedicated a library, which was the first in Rome to make the works of human genius available to the public,” and in which there were set up for the first time in the Metropolis portraits of notable authors, so allowing “those immortal spirits to speak to us in these places.” Michelangelo’s later role (1524–33) in aggrandizing another eponymous public *bibliotheca*, the Medici or “Laurentian” Library, is of course well known.³² Elsewhere, Pliny refers to yet another ancient rendition of the “Battle between Lapiths and Centaurs” as an epitome of artistic virtuosity (*NH* 36:18). In this case, the artist was none other than Phidias, and his exemplary model (ca. 440 BC) was a marvelously miniscule relief of the same subject which he carved with paradigmatic virtuosity upon the sandal of his colossal, 26 cubit (or 40 ft.) high, statue of *Athena Parthenos*. From the physical context, it even appears that the scale of Phidias’s bas-relief would have been proportionate to the actual size (85 × 90 cm) of Michelangelo’s *mezzo rilievo all’antica* (**fig. 2**).

A Florentine humanist’s citations of these passages from Pliny, or several others by Poliziano like them, to a young and impressionable Michelangelo should have produced two results, both useful to the future course of his artistic career. One effect would have provided a way for the ambitious young sculptor to advance a flattering comparison to present patrons, the Medici, making them worthy

³¹ On this point, see Gombrich, “Early Medici as Patrons of Art,” in *Norm & Form*, 35–57; see also “The Style ‘all’antica,’” in *Norm & Form*, 122–28.

³² See Ackerman, *Architecture of Michelangelo*, 97–122.

modern equivalents to Asinius Pollio, the most renowned private art collector in Rome. Pliny has, moreover, been credibly identified as providing inspiration for other notable Renaissance collectors, particularly those with sculpture-gardens (see **fig. 5**).³³ The other consequence would have been to spur Michelangelo's future series of investigations into an increasingly common procedure of conceiving artistic *ekphraseis*.³⁴

Conforming to standard classical-to-medieval practise, ekphrastic exercises produced during the Renaissance were represented by ambitiously composed, intensely vivid recreations of either historical events or lost, but still greatly renowned, antiquities. Many of the latter

³³ It now appears that many Renaissance villas, and particularly their informally arranged "sculpture-gardens," were inspired by descriptions drawn from Pliny (Elder or Younger); see MacDougall, "The Villa Mattei and the Development of the Roman Garden Style," esp. 83 ff., 102 ff.; see also Lee, "Gardens and Gods"; Huelsen, *Römische Antikengärten des 16. Jahrhunderts*; for the more formally arranged Renaissance sculpture-garden, also having antique textual precedents, see Brummer, *The Statue Garden in the Vatican Belvedere* (showing, p. 42, that this papal sculpture-garden was designed to be perceived as a "locus amoenus"); Coffin, *The Villa in the Life of Renaissance Rome*; Coffin, *Gardens and Gardening in Papal Rome*. The classic Renaissance statement on garden-architecture is set forth in Alberti's *De re aedificatoria*, IX, 4, 163 (Alberti: *On the Art of Building*, 299–300); for, however, an often overlooked classical model—Horace's canonic celebration of "Bacchic Poetic Inspiration," and as staged in a garden-grove—see below.

³⁴ For a working bibliography on "Ekphrasis," an important art historical subject still awaiting comprehensive historical monographic treatment, see Alpers, "Ekphrasis and Aesthetic Attitudes in Vasari's 'Lives'"; Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators* (esp. 78–96); Bergmann, *Art Inscribed*; Carrier, "Ekphrasis and Interpretation: Two Modes of Art History Writing"; Downey, "Ekphrasis"; Förster, "Widerherstellung antiker Gemälde durch Künstler der Renaissance"; Friedländer, *Johannes von Giza und Paulus Silentiarius*; Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*; Hohlweg, "Ekphrasis"; James and Webb, "'To Understand Ultimate Things'"; Karlsson, *Idéologie et cérémonial*, 112–36; Konecny, "Tiziano, Lodovico Dolce e i topoi"; Krieger, *Ekphrasis*; Kurman, "Ekphrasis in Epic Poetry"; Land, "Ekphrasis and Imagination: Some Observations on Pietro Aretino's Art Criticism"; Land, "Titian's 'Martyrdom of St. Peter' and the 'Limitations' of Ekphrastic Art Criticism"; Land, *Viewer as Poet*; Maguire, "Truth and Convention in Byzantine Descriptions of Works of Art"; Maguire, "Classical Tradition in the Byzantine Ekphrasis"; Maguire, *Art and Eloquence in Byzantium*; Marek, *Ekphrasis und Herrscherallegorie*; Mango, "Antique Statuary and the Byzantine Beholder"; Moffitt, "'Evidentia'"; Pernice, "Beschreibung von Kunstwerken"; Praz, *Mnemosyne*; Rosand, "Ekphrasis and the Renaissance of Painting"; Waldmann, *Der Künstler und sein Bildnis*; R. Webb, "Ekphrasis Ancient and Modern." As some of these authors fail to note however, the term "ekphrasis" seems not to have ever been applied to literary descriptions of (physical) works of art until the third century AD, and then most notably (and somewhat suddenly) by Philostratus, Callistratus, and Achilles Tatius; before that time it was nearly exclusively employed for descriptions of (more or less) real historical events: Pollitt, *Ancient View of Greek Art*, 87.

were only known to their Renaissance re-creators from these standard textual sources, themselves usually composed originally as purely rhetorical demonstrations. Through ekphrasis, prestigious art works could be reconstructed, either verbally, as in Antiquity, or, as seems increasingly the case in the Renaissance, in the tangible form of either paintings or sculptures. The familiar literary activity of rhetorical *ekphrasis* thus merges into plastic *imitatio*, which now for the Renaissance imagination implies a recreation surpassing an original model known only textually. The antiquarian ekphrastic procedure was already standard in the early Quattrocento, and according to Edgar Wind, “it could hardly have been otherwise. To secure correctness in copying these ancient images, or in reconstructing the missing parts, the Renaissance artist needed the advice of an antiquarian whose mind was formed by the study of ancient authors. A literary atmosphere thus enveloped the draughtsman [or sculptor] who ‘copied from the antique’.”³⁵

A particular case in point to illustrate again the initial ekphrastic hypothesis for the context of a *Bacchus* begun late in 1496 is Michelangelo’s celebrated, now lost, *Sleeping Cupid*.³⁶ It was perhaps carved for the artist’s own amusement during the Spring of 1496. As told by Condivi, the *Cupido dormente* was specifically conceived to demonstrate Michelangelo’s ambitions “to surpass the ancients,” and he also mentions that it was seen by another Medici, Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco. According to Vasari, Pierfrancesco even advised Michelangelo that, “if you buried it, I feel sure that it would pass for an antique at Rome, if made to appear old, and you would get much more than by selling it here [in Florence].” Its posthumous fame, as recounted by both Condivi and Vasari, establishes its reputation as representing Michelangelo’s initial attempt at direct competition with

³⁵ Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, 153; see also, in general, Clements, *Michelangelo’s Theory*, ch. 3, “Neoclassical and General Theories” (where, oddly, the term “ekphrasis” never appears).

³⁶ On Michelangelo’s *Sleeping Cupid*, see Tolnay, *Michelangelo I*, 86–87, 201–3; Hibbard, *Michelangelo*, 34–35; see also Norton, “The Lost ‘Sleeping Cupid’ of Michelangelo,” who discusses two “Cupids,” one (or both) of which may, or may not, be attributable to Michelangelo; as for the one acquired (or commissioned) by Galli, see Valentiner, “Michelangelo’s ‘Cupid’ for Jacopo Galli” (with specific reference to a standing figure in the Bargello usually labelled “Apollo”). The source of my quotations following from Vasari—who makes clear the existence, before 1497, of two different “Cupids” from Michelangelo’s hands, the second going to Galli—is Vasari, *Lives of the Painters*, IV, 113–14.

Antiquity and, in this case, also as an exercise smacking of covert art forgery.

The *Sleeping Cupid* was, in fact, immediately sold—as a genuine antiquity—to Cardinal Raffaello Riario for 200 ducats, and the idea for the *Bacchus* quickly followed. Due to the success (however fraudulent) of Michelangelo's first pseudo-antiquity, as Vasari further informs us, "Jacopo Galli, an intelligent Roman noble, recognized Michelagnolo's ability, and employed him to make [another] marble *Cupid* of life-size." Michelangelo's *second* (equally lost) *Cupido* came about because the first *Cupido dormente*, says Vasari, was immediately recognized to mark the unique occasion "when the Moderns equal the Ancients in perfection." Both Riario and Galli were shortly afterwards to become the primary patrons for Michelangelo's *Bacchus* (fig. 1), a work which likewise appears to represent another, but considerably more ambitious, sculptural *imitatio* intended to surpass the ancients.

One might argue (if only hypothetically, due to the absence of the piece in question) that Michelangelo's *Sleeping Cupid* was likewise inspired in part by Pliny, who related a curious tale, widely circulated during the Renaissance, about the erotic appeal of another of Praxiteles' celebrated works, itself the most notorious of all ancient *Sleeping Cupids*. In this instance, the Roman is discussing the sequence of two "Erotes" by the Greek Master: "To Praxiteles belongs also a *Cupid* . . . and for the sake of which people used to visit Thespiai; it is now placed in the lecture rooms of Octavia [in Rome]. There is yet another *Cupid* by him, this one nude, in Parium, the colony on the Sea of Marmara. This is a work which is equal to his *Aphrodite of Knidos*, as much for its [artistic] fame as for an infamy it had likewise suffered: Alketas the Rhodian fell in love with Praxiteles' *Cupid*—and he also left upon it the same sort of evidence for his lust [*amoris vestigium*]" (NH 36:22).

The specific nature of a similarly lustful offense committed against another famed sculpture by Praxiteles, the *Aphrodite of Knidos*, had been vividly recounted just previously in Pliny's narrative (NH 36:20–1), and this story was to become celebrated later in Renaissance artistic annals. As originally told, it reads as follows: "Superior to all the works, not only of Praxiteles, but indeed in the whole world, is the *Aphrodite* which many people have sailed to Knidos in order to see. . . . With that statue Praxiteles made Knidos famous. . . . They say that a certain man was once quite overcome with lust for the statue and, after he had hidden himself during the night [in her

shrine], he emerged to embrace the statue and there now remains a stain upon it, serving as evidence for his lustful cupidity [*cupiditatis . . . indicem maculam*].” (*NH* 36:20–21).

In Renaissance art treatises this story serves as a perverse emblem of praise for superlative artistic prowess (as it were, “*laudare per ejaculatio*”). In Lodovico Dolce’s *Dialogo della Pittura*, Pliny’s antique lusty praise is now (1557) directed at a famous contemporary painter, Titian. (**fig. 3**) His several renowned depictions of *Venus* were evidently perceived then to be so erotically charged that an awed author must exclaim at the finale of his treatise:

Yes indeed, one can truthfully say that every stroke of the brush belongs with those strokes [or caresses] that nature is in the habit of making with its hand [*colpi, che suol far di sua mano la natura*]. . . . I swear to you, my Lord, that there is no man so sharp of sight and discernment that he does not believe when he sees “Venus” [so artistically rendered] that she is alive [*la creda viva*]. There is no one so chilled by age or so hard in his temperament that he does not feel himself growing overheated, melting and passionately moved [*riscaldare, intenerire, e commoversi*], and he senses the whole of his blood pounding in his veins. And no wonder: for if [as told by Pliny] a marble statue could, by the very stimulus of its beauty, penetrate to the very marrow of a young man, so that he was so moved as to leave his [ejaculate] stain there [*vi lasciò la macchia*], then what should this [painted] figure do, which is made of flesh [*che è di carne*], which is beauty itself [*ch’è la beltà istessa*], which seems to breathe [*che spiri*]:³⁷

Michelangelo and his erudite patrons, as did Titian’s, must have known this rather notorious passage from Pliny. Accordingly, it may be believed that Michelangelo’s lost *Sleeping Cupid* (one or both) was (or were) viewed with knowledge of the passage immediately fol-

³⁷ Dolce, as quoted in Roskill, *Dolce’s “Aretino”*, 214–16 (Italian text); for the preceding as a standard critical topos, see Konecny, “Tiziano, Lodovico Dolce”; for its re-cycling in Lomazzo’s *Trattato dell’Arte* in 1584, see below. For the erotic linkage existing between these two Praxitelean subjects, *Eros* and *Aphrodite*, as it was recognized in Antiquity, see Smith, *Hellenistic Sculpture*, 82–83. A reasonable conclusion is that whenever a Cinquecento *trattatista* cited this ubiquitous topos drawn from Pliny, *NH* 36:21, he equally had in mind that which directly followed, *NH* 36:22, treating Praxiteles’ besmirched *Cupid*, which I advance as a significant narrative contribution to Michelangelo’s lost *Cupid[s]*. Moreover, to a Humanist familiar with the *Greek Anthology* (as, for instance, Erasmus certainly was) the seminal topos might have even suggested “Poetic Inspiration”; see *Palatine Anthology*, 5.197: “Venus, it is yours: the poet’s last gasp, his latest (you may say) *ejaculation*!” (as in *Greek Anthology*, 133; translator’s emphasis); hence my term, “*laudare per ejaculatio*” (see below for other sixteenth-century appearances of the seminal [!] topos).

lowing in the *Natural History* that dealt with Praxiteles' celebrated, even amorously arousing, *Cupid(s)*. Like the famed Greek sculptor's *Aphrodite*, those *Erotes* were presented by the Roman encyclopedist as exemplars of artistic fame based on naturalistic portrayal and social notoriety, as manifested in (literally) "erotic" stimulation.³⁸

The Making of Michelangelo's Bacchus

The particular case in point to strengthen further the mimetic-ekphrastic argument is Michelangelo's ambitious, life-sized figure (203 cm, with base), the *Bacchus* of ca. 1496–7.³⁹ (**fig. 1**) This striking work was conceived in Rome when the artist was around twenty-one years old, just two years after Poliziano's death and only shortly after completion of the *Sleeping Cupid*. It too exhibits distinctive traits of marked naturalism and emphatic sensuality. From this point on, besides extending some ekphrastic suggestions initially made about all these early "pagan" works, the main interpretive task in dealing with Michelangelo's *Bacchus* involves elucidation of contemporary exegetical contexts commonly attached to its unmistakable mythological subject. Condivi provides the essential narrational details about Michelangelo's commission in 1496 for his unusual depiction of the God of Wine:

Jacopo Galli, a Roman gentleman of fine intellect, made Michelangelo carve a marble "Bacchus," ten palms in height, in his house. In form and bearing this work corresponds, in every part, to the descriptions [of a similar sculpture of Bacchus] encountered in the ancient writers [*la cui forma et aspetto corrisponde in ogni parte all'intentione delli scrittori antichi*]. His aspect is merry; the eyes squinting and lascivious, like those of people excessively given to the love of wine. He holds a cup in his right hand, like one who is about to drink, and he looks at it lovingly, taking pleasure in the liqueur of which Bacchus was the inventor. For this reason he is crowned with a garland of vine leaves. On his left arm he has a tiger skin, this being the animal dedicated to him as one who greatly delights in grapes. The skin was represented, rather

³⁸ In this Plinian context, which for Michelangelo's *Sleeping Cupid* also potentially implies homo-erotic stimulation, one additionally has in mind a later art historical parallel, the famous *Bacchus* painted later (ca. 1595) by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio; on this work, and also its imputed "homo-erotic" contexts (also appealing then to highly placed Roman clerics), see Posner, "Caravaggio's Homo-Erotic Early Works."

³⁹ For the standard literature on Michelangelo's *Bacchus*, see ch. 1, n. 2 above.

than the [living] animal, for Michelangelo desired to signify that he who allows his senses to be overwhelmed [*tirar dal senso*] by the appetite for that fruit, and the liquor pressed from it [wine], ultimately loses his life. In his left hand he holds a bunch of grapes, which a merry and alert little satyr at his feet furtively enjoys.⁴⁰

Two observations may be applied to Condivi's description. Nicely situating this contemporary interpretation of Michelangelo's *Bacchus*, David Summers comments that "Condivi was given to literal understandings, but even these simple words remind us at once of the [conventional Dionysiac] language of 'transport,' with its reference to withdrawal from sense and association with death. The divine transport of the poet was not only possession by Phoebus [Apollo] but also by Bacchus."⁴¹ That conventional "language of transport," as *raptus*, we have already elucidated in detail by means of contemporary Ficinian terminology. The second point relates specifically to Condivi's claim that Michelangelo's *Bacchus* deliberately hewed to the "intentione delli scrittore antichi." Particularly interesting is the further specification by Condivi that the *Bacchus* was "10 *palmi*" in height, a figure appearing to allude to a formula of ideal proportions.

One such (now lost) *Canon of Ideal Proportions* was published by Polykleitos in the mid-fifth century BC. Often paraphrased, for instance

⁴⁰ Condivi, *Vita*, 28. For the intellectual milieu of Galli in particular, who commissioned this *Bacchus*, see Lee, "Gardens and Gods," esp. ch. 1, "Patron" (with further bibliography); for Riario, see Schiavo, "Profilo e testamento di Raffaele Riario"; see also Hirst, "Michelangelo in Rome." It had been argued by Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, 184, that Condivi's mention of a "pelle di tigre" should have been corrected, somewhat narrowly, to conform to Pliny's "leopardus" (as in *NH* 8:16), where there is, nonetheless, no particularly Bacchic connection (but see instead Philostratus, *Imagines*, I, 15, for that connection). On the other hand, I think that, in general, Condivi's feline focus was essentially correct, meaning that Poliziano, as a possible author of Michelangelo's iconographic program, most likely had in mind Boccaccio's description, as given in the *Genealogiae* (as quoted below—with "tygres"—from the edition of 1494). As I suspect, Michelangelo's putative advisors additionally would have recalled a well known description of Bacchus written by Horace, where the God of Wine is shown to have "put on the terrible *lion's* claws and fangs and [so attired] hurled back Rhoetus," the Giant: *Odes*, II, 19, "Bacchus in remotis," lines 23–4; but see also *Odes* III, 3, lines 13–15, citing the more typical tigers: "Bacche . . . *tygres* . . . trahentes." I shall later demonstrate other significant, broader and more conventional, references to the *Odes* (or *Carmina*) of Horace. Horace, like Ficino (also to be discussed later), has not previously been related to Michelangelo's *Bacchus*; nonetheless, Horace's works were certainly well known to both Lorenzo de' Medici and Poliziano, among other Florentine *eruditi*; see, for instance, Warburg, *Rinascita del Paganesimo Antico*, 42–45.

⁴¹ Summers, *Language of Art*, 529, n. 16.

in Vitruvius's *De Architectura* (III, 1.2), the text of the *Canon* had originally been concretely illustrated by Polykleitos's often copied sculpture called the *Doryphoros* ("Spear-Bearer"). According to Vitruvius's equally well known explanation of the "*homo bene figuratus*," "Nature has so planned the human body that the face, from the chin to the top of the forehead or hairline, represents the tenth part [*decimae partis*]; a tenth [of the whole] is likewise represented by the palm of the hand [*manus palma*] to the end of the middle finger." Vitruvius further specified (III, 1.5) that "the perfect number [*téleion*] fixed by the ancients was ten."⁴² The Latin text was certainly current; Leonardo translated into Italian the passage immediately preceding in Vitruvius (III, 1.3), then put it into his famous drawing of *The Vitruvian Figure* shortly before Michelangelo conceived his perhaps similarly proportionate *Bacchus*.

Final confirmation for the exclusively textual basis of Michelangelo's *Bacchus* rests upon demonstrable fact, namely the complete absence of any alternative, specifically sculptural, models for the classical Wine God. Even though there were certainly no surviving antique images of an overtly intoxicated Bacchus remotely comparable to Michelangelo's modern *Bacchus*,⁴³ by the 1490s there were circulating in Italy several classical period, textual descriptions (*ekphraseis*) of various ancient representations of tipsy Dionysiac imagery. Among various plastic works cited by these ancient authors as representing decidedly inebriated Bacchic subject matter, by far the most overtly "intoxicated" description was that one verbally drawn by Callistratus in order to recreate Praxiteles's *Dionysios* in a strikingly naturalistic fashion. Perhaps knowledge of this late classical author's Dionysiac *ekphraseis* contributed

⁴² For the Latin text of this citation, see *Vitruvius on Architecture*, 158 ff. (also noting that the often quoted passage likely refers directly to Polykleitos's *Canon*).

⁴³ For a diverse recital of the closest ancient equivalents to Michelangelo's *Bacchus*, see (in chronological sequence) Wilde, "Eine Studie Michelangelos nach der Antike" (citing portraits of Antinous); Tolnay, "Michelangelo Studien" (pointing out, 107–8, n. 2, a far greater affinity to Renaissance Bacchic *ekphraseis*); Lanchoronska, "Antike Elemente im Bacchus Michelangelos und in seinem Darstellungen des David" (observing Michelangelo's marked divergence from Roman precedents); Kleiner, *Die Begegnungen Michelangelos mit der Antike*, 16–18 (again citing portraits of Antinous); Kriegbaum, "Michelangelo und die Antike" (comparing the *Bacchus* to Polykleitos's *Doryphoros*); Battisti, "The Meaning of Classical Models in the Sculpture of Michelangelo" (citing a resemblance to a Roman *Bacchus* from the Giustiniani collection in Rome). For the potential iconographic range (wider than I would have thought) of nominally Dionysiac-Bacchic subject-matter in classical sculpture, see Smith, *Hellenistic Sculpture*, 127–54 (ch. 8, "The World of Dionysos," and see his bibliography, 279–80).

to the slightly earlier appearance, in the 1470s, of a couple of Italian sculptural representations of this new Bacchic subject-matter, and a few more appear after Michelangelo's widely discussed version of 1497 (**fig. 1**).⁴⁴

Whereas Michelangelo may not have been the first modern sculptor since Praxiteles (or Callistratus) to represent a decidedly "Drunken Bacchus," unquestionably it was he who had developed, and essentially without any known visual precedents, a naturalistic iconography of sleepy sensuality coupled to extreme intoxication. It also turns out that the closest *contemporary* textual equivalent to Michelangelo's uniquely intoxicated and exalted *Bacchus* is encountered in a series of Dionysiac exegesis published in Florence slightly earlier by Marsilio Ficino.

We may now consider some conventional Dionysiac metaphorical references, representing what seem then-standard meanings, circulating within Florentine humanist circles.⁴⁵ Of particular interest for us are certain texts written by contemporary humanists expressing newly moralized interpretations of the "euhemeristic" (or psychologically naturalistic) significance of Bacchus, and developed by them in a way largely foreign to classical and early medieval Dionysiac interpretations. Some of these obviously relevant contexts have not been adequately emphasized (or even mentioned) in the scholarly literature interpreting Michelangelo's crucial *Bacchus* (**fig. 1**).

As an initial means to establish the specific character of Bacchic meanings current in the Florentine milieu of Michelangelo's youth, mention should be made of a notable example of contemporary drama. Poliziano's *Favola di Orfeo* (1480; first published in 1494) just

⁴⁴ For these, none really approaching the drunken drama of Michelangelo's *Bacchus*, see Planiscig, "Toskanische Plastiken des Quattrocento: Unbekannte Werke Francesco di Giorgios and Andrea del Verrocchio"; Planiscig, "Bronzi inediti di autori ignoti" (dating Francesco di Giorgio's armless but precarious *Bacchus* in Vienna at ca. 1475); Schubring, *Die Plastik Sienas*, 62, fig. 39 (placing Antonio Federighi's "unbalanced" *Bacchus* in Siena at ca. 1470). For at least three versions of *Bacchus* sculpted after 1497, by Sansovino, Bandinelli, Rossi, see Lee, "Gardens and Gods," 167 (citing further bibliography).

⁴⁵ The Dionysiac materials following will include several significant statements from Renaissance texts not cited by Lee, "Gardens and Gods," particularly in her third chapter, "Theme," 90–170 (an otherwise exhaustive survey of Bacchic lore). For vinous-Bacchus topoi in general, see Pavone, *Bacco DiVino*. For an initial discussion of the range of diverse iconographical attributes potentially belonging to any "Bacchus" conceived at this time, see Tervarent, *Attributs et symboles dans l'art profane*, s. v. "Bacchus." For a broader view of the Renaissance reception and evaluation of Bacchus, see again Emmerling-Skala, *Bacchus in der Renaissance*; Gesing, *Triumph des Bacchus: Triumphidee und bacchische Darstellung in der italienischen Renaissance*; Screech, "The Winged Bacchus (Pausanias, Rabelais and Later Emblematisers)."

happens to be the first wholly secular drama to be composed in Renaissance Italy. Scene VI paints the horrific picture of the mythical poet's dismemberment and death at the hands of maddened Bacchantes. One of these Maenads addresses Bacchus himself, telling him the fate of his beloved companion Orpheus, how "limb from limb his body have we torn." The rest of the scene, a commentary in verse by a "Chorus of Maenads," provides a clinical picture of "swooning and tipsy" Dionysiac drunkenness very much like that one portrayed in Michelangelo's *Bacchus*:

Bacchus! we all must follow thee! [. . .]
 Thou hast bidden us to make merry
 Day and night with jollity! [. . .]
 See, I have emptied my horn already:
 Stretch hither your beaker to me, I pray:
 Are the hills and the lawns where we roam unsteady?
 Or is it my brain that reels away? [. . .]
 Methinks I am dropping in swoon or slumber:
 Am I drunken or sober, yes or no?
 What are these weights my feet encumber?
 You too are tipsy, well I know!
 Let every one do as ye see me do.
 Let every one drink and quaff like me!
 Bacchus! we all must follow thee! [. . .]
 Let sleep then come and our gladness bury:
 Drink you, and you, and you, while ye may!⁴⁶

Even earlier, the precedent for Bacchic celebrations in Florence was set by Lorenzo de' Medici who, by composing a Petrarchian *Trionfo di Bacco*, caused, as the Victorian aesthete John Addington Symonds enthusiastically put it, "Florence, the city of art and philosophy, to run wild in Dionysiac revels proclaiming the luxury and license of the senses."⁴⁷ Moving from the original classical sources to some late medieval adaptations, we may now turn to consider the most pertinent historical sources and contexts contributing to those early modern Florentine Bacchic revels, also including Michelangelo's memorable mimesis in marble (**fig. 1**).

⁴⁶ Poliziano, *Orfeo*, VI, as in Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy: Italian Literature in Two Parts*, 361–62, also pointing out (p. 358) how "in form and movement Poliziano's *Orfeo* adhered to the traditions of the 'Sacre Rappresentazione' and its originality consisted in the substitution of a Pagan for a Christian fable."

⁴⁷ Symonds, *ibid.*, 340–41, also quoting here extracts from "Lorenzo's Triumph of Bacchus."

CHAPTER THREE

THE CLASSICAL SOURCES OF “INSPIRATION”

Plato’s Phaedrus, Melancholic Creation, and the Poet’s Divine Inspiration

On the basis of key texts discussing commonplace Bacchic metaphors evolving since Plato, one may now argue that Michelangelo’s *Bacchus* (**fig. 1**) incorporates latent references both to notions current in the Renaissance of “Melancholic Creation” and to its acknowledged functional counterpart, “The Poet’s Divine Inspiration.” In all cases, what interests us here most are ancient celebrations of creative mindlessness, *dementia*, the kind postulated upon intellectual passivity in the face of unexpected infusions of supernatural stimulation, and as complemented by self-induced states of “intoxication” or “enthusiasm,” all of which culminates in the dramatic surrender of the conscious to unconsciousness and the often uncontrolled effect. The obvious place to begin a chronological survey of the evolving theme of Dionysiac “Divine Frenzy” is the Platonic dialogue called the *Phaedrus*. We know this volume directly applies to the historical context of Michelangelo’s *Bacchus* since Pico della Mirandola had made a specific citation of the newly recovered text (later to be cited), and such as it had been translated and analyzed by Marsilio Ficino in Florence during Michelangelo’s youth.

Moreover, this crucial Greek scripture can even be directly tied to Michelangelo’s *Bacchus*, in this case, to the designated physical location of the sculpture in Jacopo Galli’s garden of antiquities (**fig. 5**). Here is the essential historical connection. Cardinal Jacopo Sadoletto’s dramatic recasting of this especially “inspired” Platonic dialogue—appropriately but simply entitled *Phaedrus*—was, in fact, also literally situated in Galli’s Roman villa, and that was the assigned theatrical setting for Michelangelo’s *Bacchus*. Moreover, Michelangelo’s Roman patron, Jacopo Galli, the proud owner of the Renaissance *Bacchus*, directly takes part in Sadoletto’s Neoplatonic interchange, and as both host and chief interlocutor.¹ Given the specific *mise-en-scène* belong-

¹ So noted in Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, 183; for Sadoletto’s similarly inspired ekphrasis

ing to both Sadoletto's theatrical piece and Michelangelo's *Bacchus*, one then has very good reasons to argue that the sculpture may have commissioned to serve as a sort of figurative illustration of the *Phaedrus* by Plato.

For our interpretive purposes, however, the most significant passages in the classical literary archetype are contained in *Phaedrus* 244 A–245 B. This is where Plato introduces the prophetic concept of "divine madness," with this specifically representing a supernatural possession of, or infusion by, the creative spirit. *Mania* is that precondition for sublime art which, Plato observes, "provided it comes as the gift of heaven, becomes the channel by which we receive the greatest blessings." These are, Socrates states, "benefits," the kind received by creative mortals from the gods, but only "when they were in a state of frenzy." Concerning these divine benefits a *caveat* follows, one which later, during the Renaissance, acquired a specifically vinous identification, with this inevitably leading to a tangible link with Bacchus. Regarding such inspiring and heavenly endowments, as Plato remarked, "their usefulness to mortals, in their sober senses, amounts to little or nothing."

Therefore, flatly stated, this quasi-drunken, divinely endowed, creative state is God-given. To the contrary, sobriety is a mundane, or implicitly inferior, condition; "madness comes from God," Socrates affirms, "whereas sober sense is merely human." Nonetheless, there may be found "relief by the appropriate means: by recourse, that is to say, to prayer and worship." Requiring "initiation," the exact identification of the proposed sect or cult seems obvious in this context; according to Plato, "there has been discovered in [Dionysiac] rites of purification and initiation a way to make the sufferer well and to keep him well thereafter." Elsewhere (*Laws* VI: 773 D), Plato cites the founder of Greek literature, Homer, when he referred to "the mad Dionysus" (*Iliad* 6: 132—*mainomenos Dionysos*). Plato additionally states (*Laws* II: 672) that wine was given by the god to men "in order that we should go mad—*hina manomen*." But, besides mere intoxication, "divinity" is itself also imputed here to Dionysus' "maddening wine" (*mainomenos oinos*).²

of the *Laocoön*, see Sadoletto, as quoted in Bieber, *Laocoön*, 13–15 (and further quoted below).

² Homer and Plato, as in Kerényi, *Dionysos*, 131.

Plato follows up with a passage (*Phaedrus* 245 A) which was later to prove decisive in the formation of most Renaissance arguments dealing with a wholly new kind of *Inspiration*, the one specifically impelling those traditionally “free,” or Liberal, Arts. Moreover, this creative boon is specifically ascribed to “the inspired madman.” As was decisively stated by the Greek philosopher,

The third type of possession and madness is possession by the Muses. When this seizes upon a gentle and virgin soul [of a poet] it rouses it to inspired expression in lyric and other sorts of poetry, and it glorifies countless deeds of the heroes of old for the instruction of posterity. But if a man comes to the door of poetry quite untouched by the madness of the Muses, believing that technique alone will make him a good poet, he and his sane compositions never reach perfection. They are instead utterly eclipsed by the performances of the inspired madman.³

Finally, in *Phaedrus* 265 A-B, Plato announces the existence of “four kinds of divine madness,” and each is individually “ascribed to four divinities,” and these appear “when heaven sets us free from established conventions.” As we shall shortly see, the same furious, anti-conventional, quartet was to be reiterated two millennia later in Florence by Marsilio Ficino. And, of course, most of the specifically “self-expressive” tenets characterizing the school of modernist art are the kind which deliberately intend to “set [the artist] free from established conventions.” As was initially explained by Socrates, however, the four deities inspiring four kinds of *manía*, all usefully “setting us free from established conventions,” are: “the inspiration of the prophet, which belongs to Apollo [or Phoebus]; that of the mystic, belonging to *Dionysus*; that of the poet, coming from the Muses; and the fourth kind, Love, is tied to Aphrodite.”⁴

The link made by Plato between Apollo and Bacchus was to be repeated by later authors. Long before Ficino (as discussed in Chapter 5), Macrobius had drawn the same comparison around 595 in his *Saturnalia* (I, xviii, 2–6):

³ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 46–48.

⁴ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 80–81. For the plausible hypothesis that these “Four Furors” constituted an underlying, or mostly implicit, compositional principle in much post-Ficinian literature, see Fixler, “Plato’s Four Furors”; for Plato’s complementary observations, in *Laws* II, 671D, on allegorical “drunkenness” and “divine fear,” see E. Wind, “*Theios Phobos*: Untersuchungen über die Platonische Kunstphilosophie” (esp. 354 ff.).

What has been said of Apollo may also be taken as said of Bacchus. In fact, Aristotle, the author of the *Theologoumena*, positively asserts that Apollo and Bacchus are one and the same divinity. . . . Similarly, the Boeotians, while recognizing that Mount Parnassus is sacred to Apollo, venerate there, at the same time, the Delphic oracle and the Caves of Bacchus as being sacred to the same god; wherefore the rites of Apollo and Bacchus are performed on one and the same mountain. . . . Euripides writes in his *Lycimnius* . . . that Apollo and Bacchus are one and the same god [*Apollinem Liberumque unum eundemque deum esse significans*].⁵

The broader, also equally enduring, context establishing the essentially supernatural sources of "inspiration" was laid out by Plato in a later dialogue, the *Timaeus* (72A). Here, inspiration is defined as an essential vehicle of prophecy; moreover, it is a "gift of heaven," the kind providing privileged insight into the divine will. Since the *Timaeus* was the only Platonic dialogue known to the European Middle Ages, this statement is perhaps of greater historical significance. Here Plato authoritatively informs later generations of Europeans that no one ever achieves prophetic powers when he is rational. To the contrary, that boon only occurs in aberrant mental states brought about by "sleep"; only then one may benefit from "inspiration," and this divine windfall is then likened to "divine possession."

That divination is the gift of heaven to human unwisdom we have good reason to believe, in that no man in his normal senses ever deals in true and inspired divination, but [he does so] only when the power of understanding is fettered in sleep, or when he is distraught by some disorder or, as it may be, by divine possession. It is for the man [later] in his ordinary senses to recall and construe the utterances, [perceived either] in dreams or in waking life, of divination or by possession, and by reflection to make out in what manner and to whom all the visions of the seer betoken some good or ill, past, present, or to come. When a man has fallen into frenzy and is still in that condition, it is not for him to determine the meaning of his own visions and utterances; rather the old saying is true, that only the sound in mind can attend to his own concerns and know himself. Hence it is the custom to set up spokesmen to pronounce judgment on inspired divination. These are themselves given the name of diviners by some who are quite unaware that they are [themselves] expositors of a riddling oracle or a vision and they best deserve to be called, not diviners, but the spokesmen of those who practice divination.⁶

⁵ Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, 128.

⁶ Plato, *Timaeus*, 86–87.

Since Plato's definition of "Inspiration" was to become fundamental to Renaissance thought—indeed, it was to become the literal *locus classicus* for all subsequent notions of artistic *inspiration* in Western culture—a fundamental distinction must be drawn between his age and the post-medieval era. In short, whereas the Renaissance was the age of the printed book, the context for Plato's notions of poetic creation was grounded in a strictly "oral" culture. This was an oral culture which depended upon mnemonics; archaic Greece was a culture almost without writing. Then, not only was "poetry" a form of ecstatic ritual, it was additionally an art declaimed before a public. To the contrary, much later, in the Renaissance, poetry was either silently *read*, or it was perhaps even composed, by a solitary individual. Plato's "poet" was, however, a public performer, a chanter, a "rhapsode" who voiced memorized stanzas, and he was accompanied by a corps de ballet, dancers, just as the Muses were pictured by ancient writers. Choreography is a matter of memorized motions and collective formulae, and its compositional glue is "rhythm"; so too was contemporary "poetry" rhythmically declaimed. Moreover, both poetry and dance were "seen," that is, they made their visually stylized point by mimetic corporeal gesture and measured aural expression. Therefore, in its archaic Greek context, "to be inspired" was an equally physical and emotional condition, one immediately embracing both the performers *and* their audience. Now, it is otherwise; since the momentous invention of the printing press, poetry has become an altogether different experience: mute, non-visual, and mostly motionless and solitary.⁷

Another decisive change was wrought much earlier. Shortly after the appearance of Plato's fundamental statement on Inspiration, in the later fourth century BC an explicit link was made between the "divine madness" of the Poet-Artist and wine as a kind of artificial catalyst for Inspiration. According to this new interpretation, the key element was the "melancholic temperament," a baleful but intellectually productive condition which Renaissance Humanism was to refashion into an emblematic sign of the great visual artist of the modern age.⁸ Michelangelo himself unquestionably subscribed to this

⁷ For these important cultural distinctions, see Clark, *Theory of Inspiration*, ch. 2, "Enthusiasmos: Archaic Greece and Plato's *Ion*."

⁸ For the "melancholic-artistic temperament," see Panofsky and Saxl, *Dürers Kupferstich "Melancholia I"*; Wittkower, *Born Under Saturn*; for a revisionist (or clinical) view, see Moffitt, "Painters 'Born Under Saturn': The Physiological Explanation."

notion, and so he characterized himself in a famous sonnet—"La mia allegrezza è la malinconia" (Melancholy Represents My Delight)—and so was he, in fact, depicted as the bearded and conventionally melancholic "Heracitus" by Raphael in his fresco painting of *The School of Athens* (15010–11) in the Stanza della Segnatura in the Vatican.

The initial fateful, three-part connection—between a now standard topos of the divine madness of the Poet, particularly as newly triggered by Dionysus's intoxicating wine, and a larger and equally novel syndrome of melancholic creative achievement—first appears decisively formulated in the so-called "Problem XXX."⁹ A text (wrongly) attributed to Aristotle, this was much later to become popularized by the Florentine Neoplatonists, particularly Marsilio Ficino. In fact, Ficino has been given the credit (by Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl) for being "the first writer to identify what 'Aristotle' had called the melancholy of intellectually outstanding men with Plato's 'divine frenzy'." The influential pseudo-Aristotelian passage began by announcing that "all those who have become eminent in philosophy [*philosophian*], or politics [*politikèn*], or poetry [*poiesin*] or the arts [*tek-nas*, that is, artistic endeavor in general, written or even visual] are clearly melancholics [*melankolikoi*]." To the contrary, Plato's idea (in the *Phaedrus*, for example) of a *furor divino*, or inspired madness, did not include "melancholy" as such; Plato's concept of a creative "divine frenzy" was originally defined as a "Dionysiac" condition. Only later did that condition become associated, specifically in the *Problem XXX* attributed to "Aristotle," with the predominance of black (*melas*) bile, so producing *melancholia*.

In effect, it was the pseudo-Aristotle who first introduced, but still in a rudimentary fashion, what may be called the "Physiological Explanation" of artistic creativity, that is, as a condition of the overly taxed imagination, with this producing identifiable outward, *physical manifestations*. This etiological perception directly leads the author to an attempt at a rational, or clinical explanation. So doing, he incidentally introduces a long discussion of wine—the famed gift of Bacchus to mortals—and he establishes its relation to the "frenzied," but inherently creative, melancholic temperament:

⁹ I will be quoting from a bi-lingual text, as given in Klibansky, Panofsky, Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, where my reference, following, to Ficino appears on p. 259, and also citing the Michelangelo sonnet, previously quoted, on p. 232.

In order to find out the reason [why creative people are melancholics] we must begin by making use of analogy. Wine in large quantity manifestly produces in men much the same characteristics which we attribute to the melancholic [personality]. There is, for each character, a class of men who represent it [i.e., the humoral type, or “temperament”: either melancholic, phlegmatic, choleric, or sanguine]. For as one man is momentarily one way while drunk [so exposing his *pathos*, or spontaneous reaction to experience], another is always that way by nature [so representing his *êthos*, or fixed character]. One man is loquacious, another emotional, another is easily moved to tears; and this effect, too, wine has on some people. . . . Some relapse into complete silence, especially those melancholics who are out of their minds, or ecstatic [*melagkolikon hosoi ekstatikoi*].

The conclusion reached is that:

The action of black bile being variable, melancholics are variable. Heat and cold are [nonetheless] the factors in our bodies which are most important for determining our character. Like wine, when introduced in a larger or smaller quantity into the body, it makes us persons of such and such a character. . . . Therefore, all melancholy persons are out of the ordinary, not owing to illness but instead from their natural constitution.

Nonetheless, for our broader purposes—mapping the history of artistic “inspiration”—perhaps more important is this Hellenistic author’s direct alignment of the “melancholic” personality with the hoary *topos* of ecstatic “divine inspiration”:

Many [melancholics] are also subject to fits of exaltation and ecstasy, because its heat [of genius] is located near the seat of the intellect. This is how Sibyls and soothsayers arise, and all [others] that are divinely inspired; they become such not by illness but by a natural temperament. Maracus the Syracusan was actually a better poet when his was out of his mind.¹⁰

This “inspired” position was later expanded upon by Aretaeus the Cappodcian, with him now making the melancholic condition as much un-willed as it is self-taught:

In a [melancholic] fury, people of genius and intelligence will come to understand astronomy [then meaning astrology] without being taught [*sine doctore*]; and they will know philosophy uninstructed [*a nemine traditam*], and they will know also poetry, just as if they were inspired by the Muses [*poeticam quoque veluti a musis infusam norunt*].¹¹

¹⁰ “Problemata XXX,” as in Klibansky, Panofsky, Saxl, *ibid.*, 18–29.

¹¹ Aretaeus, as in Schleiner, *Melancholy, Genius and Utopia*, 23.

Centuries later, the figure of the "inspired melancholic" was again addressed by Andreas Laurentius (André du Laurens) in his *A Discourse on the Preservation of Sight: of Melancholike Diseases* (1599), observing that in such "enthusiastic" and "divinely ravished" people:

Their conceit [wit or intellect] is very deep, their memorie very fast, their body is made strong to endure labour, and when the humour groweth hot by the vapours of blood, it causeth, as it were, a kind of divine ravishment, commonly called *Enthousiasma*, which stirreth men up to prophesie; in such manner, as that it may seeme to containe in it some divine parts.¹²

Such notions, which are in their expression as much physiological as psychological, became common topics among certain Roman authors, who were later to become well known to Quattrocento scholars. Among others, the pseudo-Aristotle's claims about the fundamental melancholic basis of creative genius were cited by Cicero and Seneca.¹³ The broader meanings attached to the idea need not even refer to the Pseudo-Aristotle. According to Cicero (*De Oratore*, II, 46): "I have often heard that no man can be a good poet, as they say is left recorded in the writings of both Democritus and Plato, that is, without ardor of imagination, and the excitement belonging to something like frenzy."¹⁴

The currency—or re-composition—of such manic-creative notions during the Renaissance is quickly documented. Among other texts, we have Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim's *De Occulta Philosophia*, the first part of which was written around 1509 (then widely circulated, and it was eventually published in 1533). Agrippa speaks of that "divination which Aristotle calls ravishment, or a kind of madness, [and] by melancholy, saith he, some men are made, as it were, divine, foretelling things to come, and some men are made poets," also noting that "all men that were excellent in any science, were, for the most part, melancholy; Democritus and Plato attest the same." By 1510, therefore, the essentially psychical connection established between the potentially "divine" Poet and Painter (and even the Architect) through the medium of *Melancholia* is firmly established:

¹² Laurentius, as in *ibid.*, 128.

¹³ Cicero (*Tusculanum Disputations*, I, 80: "Aristoteles quidem ait omnes ingeniosos melancholicos esse"), and Seneca (*On Tranquility*, XVII, 10: "... sive Aristoteli 'nulum magnum ingenium sine mixtura dementiae fuit'"), both as cited in Klibansky et al., *Saturn and Melancholy*, 33, n. 65.

¹⁴ Cicero, *On Oratory and Orators*, 136.

"The mind [assaulted by melancholy] oftentimes receives," Agrippa further states, "wonderful ways and forms of manual arts. So we see that any most ignorant man doth presently become an excellent painter, or contriver of building, and to become a master in any such [visual] art."¹⁵ Except for the novel introduction of painters, and even architects, into the canon of Melancholic Inspiration, the rest of Agrippa's statement essentially embraces those commonplaces easily traced back to various ancient, classical-era sources.

Credit for popularizing the wholly positive identification of inspired artistic genius with wine in general, or with Bacchus in particular, seems mostly due to the Roman poet Horace (65–8 BCE). Horace was certainly an authority as well known in Renaissance Florence as elsewhere in Europe.¹⁶ He was, according to informed modern scholars, the main source in the post-classical period for the topos of the "Poet's Divine Frenzy." Horace was, in fact, to remain the principal authority for the idea of "divine art"—that is, until 1484. That was the year that Marsilio Ficino eventually released his Latin translation, still however without his commentary, of Plato's *Phaedrus*, a Hellenic work decisively praising Bacchic Inspiration which had previously remained unknown for the most part to Europeans.¹⁷ Concurrently, the classical epithet *divinus*, which was originally only attached to a *writer*, the epic poet, was eventually translated into Italian, *divino*. That done, then the honorific title was applied for the first time to a *visual* artist—Michelangelo himself—by Ariosto in 1516 (*Orlando Furioso*, 33:2).¹⁸

It was Horace who particularly regarded himself, that is, in his self-appointed role as the quintessential Poet, as the victim of a divinely inspired *amabilis insania* ("amiable madness"); this conceit is emphasized in his poems "*Descende caelo*" and "*Caelo tonantem*" (*Odes*,

¹⁵ Agrippa, *Philosophy of Natural Magic*, 189–91 (the archaic translation is that by one "J. F.," originally published in London in 1651).

¹⁶ On this particular point, see Batinski, "Horace's Rehabilitation of Bacchus"; for Florentine references to Horace, see Warburg, *Rinascita del Paganesimo Antico*, 42–45.

¹⁷ For an introduction leading to what immediately follows dealing with "divine" artistic inspiration, see Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, 474–75. For a much more comprehensive, but essentially unfocused (historically or conceptually) discussion of "inspiration," see Nahm, *Artist as Creator*, 1956 [rpt. *Genius and Creativity*, 1965; disappointing either way].

¹⁸ So noted by Summers, *Language of Art*, 528, n. 40 (but citing the year for Ariosto's epithet as 1532).

III, 4, 5). For our particular purposes however, the most significant legacy from Horace is his twenty-line verse entitled "*Quo me, Bacche, rapis*" (*Odes*, III, 25), where he describes himself, as the archetypal Poet, as being "carried away" (*raptus*), and as much literally as figuratively by Bacchus, the madly inspiring God of Wine and Poetic Frenzy. Also of interest is the Latin poet's placement of Bacchus within "groves and grottoes," also calling to mind the real-life situation of Michelangelo's *Bacchus* within Jacopo Galli's Roman sculpture-garden (**fig. 5**). As he sings,

Bacchus, where will you carry me full of you? My spirit renewed, what groves and grottoes am I driven into? . . . Just as in the mountains the insomniac Dionysiac stands rapt . . . just so is it my pleasure to wonder at unregarded banks and groves forlorn. O master of the Naiads and of Bacchanalians, strong to uproot the princely ash, I shall utter nothing insignificant, lowly or not immortal. Sweet the risk, Leanean [Bacchus, as the "Liberator"], to follow the God, crowning one's brows with sprouting vine leaves.¹⁹

In this context, Horace's grape-crown is a dual motif, one functioning here equally as a sign of Bacchic triumph in the arts, and as a sign of wholehearted, "enthusiastic," Dionysiac participation. Similar meanings may be attached to the vines crowning Michelangelo's *Bacchus* (**fig. 1**). Another Roman author, also enjoying great fame in the Renaissance, and who often testified that the Poet is "inspired" by Bacchus, was Ovid (and so stated in his *Fasti*, VI, 5; *Pontic Letters*, III, 4, 93; IV, 2, 25). Many other Latin authors similarly attest to the role of the God of Wine as (likewise) the God of Poetry.²⁰ The idea of Bacchus "dominating and stirring the mind" of the archetypal Poet even appears much later, in the twelfth century, in popularized Latin verses composed in Germany by the so-called "Arch-Poet of Cologne" (fl. 1160/65).²¹

¹⁹ Horace, *Complete Odes*, 157–58; for a detailed look at Horace's formulation, in his "*Que me, Bacche, rapis*," of "Bacchic enthusiasm," see Conner, "Enthusiasm, Poetry, and Politics: A Consideration of Horace, *Odes* III, 25." For the putative "programme" ordering Galli's sculpture-garden, see n. 27 below.

²⁰ For Bacchus' connection with poetic creation in classical Latin antiquity, with this even becoming a "cliché" among Augustan poets, see Griffin, *Latin Poets and Roman Life*, 70–75; Troxler-Keller, *Die Dichterlandschaft des Horaz*, 56–64; for wine and creativity, melancholic and/or inspired, see Crowther, "Water and Wine as Symbols of Inspiration"; Knox, "Wine, Water, and Callimachean Aesthetics"; Pavone, *Bacco DiVino*; Weinberg, *The Wine and the Will*.

²¹ "*Michi numquam spiritus poetrie datur / Nisi prius fuerit venter bene satur;* /

Nonetheless, the decisive contribution was to be made in Florence, towards the end of the fifteenth century, by Marsilio Ficino. The definitive Renaissance Dionysiac text is his translation of, and extensive commentary upon the long-lost Platonic source-text: *Argumentum et commentaria Marsilii Ficini in Phaedrum*. Evidently initially composed between 1466 and 1468, the *Phaedrus Commentary* was first published in 1484. More significant for our purposes, it was subsequently republished, now with Ficino's complete commentary, in 1496—the same year Michelangelo's *Bacchus* was conceived.²² Since we have no reason *not* to take this to be a work well known to Michelangelo, even if only at second-hand, we shall need later (in Chapter 5) to closely examine Ficino's neoplatonic commentaries. This argument is particularly germane in the specific case of Michelangelo's drunken *Bacchus* (**fig. 1**), a work which we know was commissioned by Cardinal Raffaele Riario and, as Michael Hirst observes, "we should recall that Ficino himself corresponded with Riario over twenty years."²³

Praxiteles' Dionysios and Bacchantic Frenzy

As one might expect, such widely discussed Dionysiac concepts were bound to find their visual analogues in ancient art. We have seen the consistent testimony of Michelangelo's colleagues that he meant to recreate the actual appearance of ancient artifacts, likewise including a *mimesis* of their classical subject matter. Given such accounts, the

Dum in arce cerebri Bacchus dominatur, / In me Phebus irruit et miranda fatur." Arch-Poet, as quoted in Curtius, *European Literature*, 474; in English it may read, "Never did the flighty Muse titivate my pages . . . not before Lord Bacchus reigns over my endeavour"; for the complete poem, "Estuans intrinsecus" (as "The Archpoet's Confession"), see *Selections from the Carmina Burana*, 151–58.

²² For this data, and the bi-lingual text from which I shall later quote, see Allen, *Marsilio Ficino and the Phaedran Charioteer*.

²³ Hirst and Dunkerton, *Making and Meaning*, 75, n. 26. To my knowledge, Ficino's *Commentary on Phaedrus* has never before been so directly related to Michelangelo, and never specifically to his *Bacchus*. But had Michael Allen's excellent critical, Latin-English, text (published in 1981) been made available to art historians beforehand, I am sure that this connection would have been earlier noted, for instance, by David Summers; in his otherwise exhaustive topical study on *Michelangelo and the Language of Art* (similarly published in 1981), he discusses all the pertinent arguments for the sculptor's direct knowledge of various of Ficino's *Opera* (pp. 9, 16–17; also citing Chastel's *Marsile Ficini et l'Art*, as cited later in Chapter 5, with this generally relating Michelangelo to the Ficino), but Summers makes no specific mention of Ficino's crucial *Phaedrus Commentary*.

logical assumption is that the intrinsic meaning of his *Bacchus* (**fig. 1**) would have been based upon standard descriptions of a particularly renowned artistic prototype, specifically a "Dionysus," created during the classical period.

Even though known only by its posthumous fame, mainly as transmitted by Pliny, Praxiteles's representation of *Dionysios* seems to have been taken during the Renaissance to represent *the* definitive sculptural rendering of Bacchus (see, for example, **fig. 6**). As described by Pliny, the proper title belonging to Praxiteles's long lost, two-part ensemble would have been read by the Florentine humanists to represent: "Father Freedom, or Noble Intoxication, with a Satyr (*Liber Pater, [sive] Ebrietas nobile, et satyrus*)."²⁴ To document the enduring modern renown of Praxiteles's *Dionysios*, we have the additional, graphic evidence of Andrea Alciati's *Liber Emblemata* (first published in 1531, with some 175 subsequent editions).

Alciati's emblem 25, "Concerning the Sculpture of Bacchus" (*In statuam Bacchi*), is specifically dedicated to Praxiteles' lost masterwork (here shown satyr-less). (**fig. 6**) Alciati was himself a devoted student of Philostratus's *Imagines*, a book also vividly describing "ecstatic" and "intoxicated," Bacchic subjects. Since the *Imagines* was eventually published in the Renaissance alongside Callistratus's *Descriptiones* of ancient sculptural masterpieces, Alciati must have also closely studied this other classic of ekphrastic literature. Alciati's verse begins with a question: "Oh, Father Bacchus, who with mortal sight came best to know you? And who with skillful hand has best fashioned your limbs?"

²⁴ "Praxiteles quoque, qui marmore felicior, ideo et clarior fuit, fecit tamen et ex aere pulcherrima opera: Proserpinae raptum, item catagusam et *Liberum patrem, Ebrietatem nobilemque una Satyrum*, quem Graeci 'periboëton' cognominant" (emphasis mine). In this instance however, I must depart from David Summers's (actually Jex-Blake's) rendering of Pliny's text (Summers, *Language of Art*, 265) which represents Praxiteles' *Dionysios* as "a figure of Intoxication grouped with an admirable Satyr." In the first place, the myriad manuscript corruptions of Pliny's text are notorious, and, secondly, a "noble Satyr" makes no historical sense, and, finally, turning *nobile* into "admirable" does not correct the iconographic disjunction. The connective suffix *-que* (meaning "and") must refer instead to the "allegory," itself noble and unitary (*una*), of *Ebrietas*, here concretely personified by Bacchus-Dionysus. Whatever Pliny's original phrasing was, the equation was probably understood—specifically meaning in the Renaissance—instead to represent the "renowned [allegorical] figure of Father Freedom and/or Noble Intoxication, in one person [*una*], with a Satyr." Other Roman authors favored by the Florentine humanists, particularly Horace, support the applicability of this "noble intoxication" reading in the Renaissance for such a Bacchic ensemble.

The answer: “Praxiteles it was who saw me [and] he pictured me just as I was then.”²⁵

Since Alciati’s emblem does not show the satyr, one suspects that his textual source was not Pliny, rather Callistrates. This was probably also the case with Michelangelo. David Summers usefully suggests that Michelangelo’s humanist advisers were most likely familiar with Callistratus’s *Descriptiones*, or *Ekphraseis* (ca. 280 AD). Reading these “Descriptions” would have prompted those learned authorities to suggest to the young sculptor some strictly *sculptural* subjects for timely ekphrastic treatments, and as specifically derived from this Greek writer.²⁶ More to the point, in his “Eighth Description-*Ekphrasis*,” this

²⁵ “Bacche pater, quis te mortali lumine novit, / Et docta effinxit quis tua membra manu? Praxiteles, qui me . . . vidit . . . / Atque illo pinxit tempore, qualis eram.” My citations from Alciati (only previously related, and then only briefly, to our subject by Charles Carman, “Michelangelo’s Bacchus”) conform to the Latin text, as given in *Alciatus*, ed. Daly (2 vols.). For Alciati’s knowledge of, and references to Philostratus’s *Eikones*, see Manning, “Alciati and Philostratus’s ‘Icones’”; Selig, “Philostratus’s ‘Imagines’ and Alciati’s ‘Emblemata’”; for Philostratus’s *Icones* published alongside Callistratus’s *Descriptiones*, see the note following; see also *Icones* I: 15, 18, 19, 25, for Philostratus’s similarly interpretive Bacchic descriptions. For other Renaissance-period emblems dealing with Bacchus (all more or less along thematic lines developed here), see Schöne, *Emblemata*, cols. 1825–32 (10 different emblems).

²⁶ For the initial scholarly connection made between Callistratus and Michelangelo’s *Bacchus*, see Summers, *Language of Art*, 265–66. He, however, attached a caveat to his observation: “It is impossible, of course, to demonstrate [sic. ‘document’] any relation between an *ekphrasis* and a work of sculpture; at the same time, the importance of such texts cannot be minimized: it is likely that Michelangelo labored to equal the marvelous passage of artifice” recorded in these well-known texts (p. 266). Nonetheless, according to my mimetic-ekphrastic arguments concerning earlier “pagan” works by Michelangelo, most likely there was a pattern of ekphrastic practice established well before the conception of his *Bacchus*. Circulating earlier in manuscript (for instance, with copies in the Medici and Vatican libraries), the influential *ekphraseis* by Callistratus and the younger Philostratus eventually had a mutual *editio princeps* in 1503 (*Icones iunioris Philostrati; Descriptiones Callistrati*, Venice: Aldus, 1503), followed in turn by the erudite commentaries of Blaise de Vigenère (*Les Images, ou tableaux de la plate peinture*, Paris, 1578); see Schlosser, *La Literatura Artística*, 33; see also, for the early printed editions, *British Museum General Catalogue of Printed Books*, cols. 197–99 (Callistratus), 254–59 (Philostratus); for manuscripts circulating before 1500, of Callistratus as well as Aeschylus, Euripides, Aristophanes, etc., see Bolgar, *Classical Heritage and its Beneficiaries*, Appendix I. For the great popularity among Renaissance painters of Philostratus’s Bacchic commentaries in particular, see Saxl, *A Heritage of Images*, 89–104 (“A Humanist Dreamland”), and, more generally, see Förster, “Philostrats Gemälde in der Renaissance”; see also n. 25 above, on Alciati and Philostratus, and, Ch. 2, n. 34, on “ekphrasis” in general. In any event, it will be recalled that Poliziano was thoroughly fluent in Greek literature, not to mention wholly familiar with the manuscript holdings of the Medici Library in Florence, so he was probably the one who would have first called Michelangelo’s attention to Callistratus’ *Ekphraseis*.

late-classical author celebrated at some length Praxiteles' "Cult-Statue of Bacchus" (*Dionyseoi Agalma*). According to this textual source, just like Michelangelo's *Bacchus* placed in Galli's sculpture-garden (**fig. 5**),

There was a grove, and in it stood [a life-sized cult-statue of] Dionysus in the form of a young man, so delicate that the bronze was transformed into flesh, with a body so supple and relaxed that it seemed . . . to show the appearance of life, and that it would yield to the very fingertip if you touched it. . . . It had the bloom of youth; it was full of daintiness; it melted with desire . . . and it was full of laughter, nay, it wholly passed the bounds of wonder in that the [sculptor's] material gave out evidence of joy and [it seemed] that the bronze feigned to represent the [human] emotions.²⁷

With a slight change of artistic material, from bronze to marble, this description does make a very close fit to the actual appearance of Michelangelo's *Bacchus* (**fig. 1**): both sculptural representations are shown to be similarly youthful and fleshy, supple and relaxed, desirable and laughing, and all the rest. Indeed, one can easily imagine a contemporary exclaiming that Michelangelo's skilled handling of Carrara marble had indeed "wholly passed the bounds of wonder." Besides its enviable formal, even "emotional," accomplishments, which are presented by this ekphrastic author as praiseworthy exemplars of sheer virtuosity, Praxiteles' masterwork also revealed some significant content. According to the dramatized finale of Callistratus's vivid description,

The eye was gleaming with fire, in appearance it was the eye of a man in a frenzy; for the bronze exhibited the Bacchic madness [or frenzy: *manikon* . . . *Bacchensimon*] and it seemed to be divinely inspired, just as, I think, Praxiteles similarly had the power to infuse into his statue the Bacchic ecstasy.²⁸

As is specifically shown here, there is now a direct link to be drawn between the "divinely inspired" artist and the unchecked "Bacchic ecstasy" which pulsates throughout his "divinely inspired" artwork, that which itself depicts a mental state of unchecked "frenzy." As

²⁷ Callistratus, *Descriptions*, 404–5.

²⁸ Callistratus, *Descriptions*, 406–7; cf. Philostratus, *Imagines*, I, 18, "Bacchai": *ibid.*, 72–75. In 1877, Praxiteles' sculptural-group of *Hermes with the Infant Dionysios* (either the original or a very close copy) turned up at the Temple of Hera at Olympia—exactly where Pausanias saw it; for the arguments, pro and con, attributing this fine marble to Praxiteles himself, see Carpenter, "A Belated Report on the Hermes Controversy"; for Praxiteles in his cultural context, see (briefly) Pollitt, *Art and Experience in Classical Greece*, 151–59.

we shall see, such heightened comparisons or equivalencies, and as presented *in bono*, were standard features in classical thought regarding extreme creativity.

In his “Fourth Ekphrasis,” Callistratus describes yet another ancient sculpture, the “Cult-Statue of an Indian” (*Indou Agalma*), and this is another artwork which he specifically ascribes to the widespread cult of Dionysus. As he tells us, what he saw was the anomalous rendering of a decidedly tipsy figure, placed “by a spring and set up with a dedication to the Nymphs.” His description further includes many specific “eikastic” details—or naturalism, according to measured, proportionate likeness; all of these are included to show that the Greek sculptor’s overall purpose was specifically to indicate that “drunkenness was overcoming him.” In fact, the ekphrasis following seems almost like a pointed verbal depiction of the clinical facts characterizing the inebriated condition uniquely characterizing Michelangelo’s *Bacchus* (fig. 1). And, to repeat a significant point, in this particular visual aspect Michelangelo’s masterwork has no identifiable close classical—or even contemporary—sculptural counterpart.²⁹ Therefore, and from what follows, it must appear that Michelangelo’s ultimate model—that praiseworthy *exemplum* deemed essential for any kind of laudable *imitatio* as practiced by any ambitious Renaissance artist—must have been Callistratus’ vivid prose.

As we recall, Condivi had carefully described the revived Florentine version of *Bacchus* (fig. 1) as a decidedly unsteady but jolly toper, specifically one whose “aspect is merry; the eyes squinting and lascivious, like those of people excessively given to the love of wine.” As he also recognized, this was a very pointed characterization, “for Michelangelo desired to signify that he who allows his senses to be overwhelmed by the appetite for that fruit [the grape], and the liquor pressed from it [the wine], ultimately loses his life.” According to the description composed by Callistratus much earlier, *his* Bacchic figure similarly “stood reeling and jovial, was not able to plant his feet steadily, but was trembling and tending to sag to the ground. The marble resembled a man overcome by this [intoxicated] condition, and it all but quivers as it indicates the trembling that comes from drunkenness. There was nothing delicate about the statue. . . .”³⁰ Certainly,

²⁹ See citations given above, in ch. 2, nn. 43, 44.

³⁰ Callistratus, *Descriptions*, 388–91; David Summers (*Language of Art*) does not, however, cite this other, quite complementary, ekphrasis by Callistratus.

this brief but vivid description also directly applies to the visible testimony provided by Michelangelo's *Bacchus*. The end result is that of clear evidence pointing to a timely *mimesis* by Michelangelo of Callistratus's description of a praiseworthy ancient sculpture. Most likely, this was also the given literary model for Condivi's modern *ekphrasis* of the acknowledged Florentine and modern, Bacchic masterwork.

Elsewhere, Callistratus (*Descriptiones*, II: "*Bacches Agalma*") discusses "The Cult-Statue of a Bacchante." This other artwork also allows Callistratus to explain the sources of any such divinely inspired, specifically *Dionysiac*, art exhibiting the "*manikon Bacchensimon*," or wholly conventionalized "Bacchic frenzy." Our Greek ekphrastic writer does so, in fact, in a way that directly recalls Plato's earlier descriptions of creatively and/or divinely inspired poets, those who necessarily become "mindless" and then lurch about "raving like Bacchantes" (see **fig. 4**). In his *Ion*, a text which was itself well known to the Florentine Humanists, Plato has Socrates observe that:

Good poets use no art at all, but are [all] inspired and possessed. . . . These are not in their right mind when they make their beautiful songs, but they are then like Corybants [or Maenads], out of their wits and dancing about. As soon as poets rely upon their [Corybantic] harmony and rhythm, they become frantic and possessed, just like the Bacchante women, who are possessed and out of their senses. . . . The poet is an airy thing, a winged and holy thing; and he [as a creative artist] cannot make poetry until he becomes inspired, when he goes out of his senses and no mind is left in him, [then creating] not by art, but by divine dispensation. Therefore, the only poetry that each one can make is what the Muse has pushed him to make. . . . Therefore, God takes the mind out of the poets, and uses them as his ["demented"] servants. These beautiful poems are not human, are not made by man, but are instead divine and made by God. The poets are [therefore] nothing but the gods' interpreters, possessed each one by whatever god it may be [or whom he might represent by his art] (*Ion* 533 D–535 B).³¹

Among other points, Plato argues—and long before André Breton did—that poetic creation is wholly passive: God "uses" the poet as his "mindless" scribe. Since the role of the poet, or generic Artist, is wholly passive, thus his "inspired" act of "divine" creativity operates autonomously, without his conscious participation. Being unconscious (or "a-conscious"), the creative act thus becomes (according

³¹ *Great Dialogues of Plato*, 18–19; *Ion* 533 D–535 B.

to our anachronistic modern terminology) “automatic.” As the Surrealists would agree, *l’art automatique* is willed by an external agent, for there is no control exerted over the aesthetic product by the ostensible creator, a mere man: “Good poets use no art at all, but are inspired and possessed.” (*Sic dixit Plato.*) Again, whatever the specific ramifications, the situation is wholly, uniquely, and very specifically, “Bacchic.” Moreover, since the maker has no control over “his” product, it seems *almost* to be made now by “chance.” At this time, however, it cannot be wholly a matter of chance (*le hasard*) because, of course, “God does not play dice with the universe” (according to Albert Einstein). However, when André Breton manipulated the same ideas millennia later, then—finally—the creative desideratum did become pure Chance.

By the time Callistratus was writing (ca. 280 AD), such interpretations of the “Bacchic” creative act, and of the uniquely “inspired” and “divine” art uniquely resulting from it, seem to have become commonplaces in Greek thought—even in its visual arts, particularly sculpture. In his “Second Description,” the Greek ekphrast vividly describes an actual sculptural representation of Dionysiac inspiration. Most interestingly, this he does in a way that would have been obviously of use to Michelangelo, as well as to nearly all Renaissance spokesmen arguing for a novel installation of plastic creations, our “Art,” among the Liberal Arts. Their post-medieval arguments for the “liberal” status of the visual artist were particularly epitomized by current, and increasingly heated, discussions dealing with the theory of *Ut Pictura Poësis*. This argument, holding that “As in Poetry, so too in Painting,” thereby ambitiously yoked the long-established moral-rhetorical purposes of Poetry to Painting. So doing, “painting”—a representational discipline previously relegated to mere “craftspersons” (*banausoi*)—was now elevated to the status of “Art”—an honorific title previously only granted to Poetry. However, as was observed (and similarly argued) long before by Callistratus,

It is not only the art of poets and writers of prose which is inspired [*epipnéuontai*], that is, once divine power from the gods falls upon their tongues. Nay, [even] the hands of sculptors also, when they are seized by the gift of a more divine inspiration, [also may] give utterance to [artistic] creations that are [likewise] possessed and full of madness. So Skopas [**fig. 4**], moved as it were by some inspiration, imparted to the production of this [Bacchic] statue the divine frenzy within him. Why should I not describe to you from the beginning the inspiration

[*enthousiasmon*] belonging to this work of art? . . . The stone, while retaining its own nature, yet seemed to depart from the law which governs stone. What one saw was really an image, but art had carried imitation [*mimesin*] over into actual reality. . . .

Though it had no power to move, [nonetheless] the statue [fig. 4] knew how to leap about in Bacchic dance, and thus the sculpture would respond to the god [Dionysus] as he entered into its inner being. When we saw its face we stood speechless, for so manifest upon it was the evidence of its sense perception, even though [real] sense perception was not present. There was given [to us by the sculptor] so clear a perception of a Bacchant's divine possession [*theiasmos*] that was stirring her Bacchic frenzy [*manias*]³²—even though no such possession [actually] had aroused it. Fashioned by art in a manner not to be described, there shone so strikingly from the sculpture all the signs of the passions which a soul goaded by [Bacchic] madness displays. . . . Thus Skopas, fashioning creatures without life, was an artificer of truth, and so he imprinted miracles [of sense perception] upon bodies made of inanimate matter.³²

Thus, Bacchic "madness" becomes the unique vehicle lending to visual art—particularly as represented by a given masterwork of *sculpture* (fig. 4) with specifically Dionysiac subject matter—the same prestige as was traditionally accorded only to Poetry. Hitherto, it was only Poetry that had been accredited with the power to "give utterance to [artistic] creations that are possessed and full of madness." The unquestionable cultural significance of this specific passage by Callistratus was pointed out long ago (1926) by Edgar Zilsel in his fundamental study on the historical evolution of the "Concept of Genius." As he then observed,

The old teachings about the Poet's "enthusiasm," perhaps now inflected by a Jewish prophetic tone, have thus finally entered into the vocabulary of the visual arts. In Callistratus's statement, the idea of divine

³² Callistratus, *Descriptions*, 380–85. For ancient, pre-medieval (and so pre-Renaissance), conceptions of the kind of creative-artistic "enthusiasm" celebrated by Callistratus, see Angus, *The Mystery Religions*; Delatte, *Les conceptions de l'enthousiasme*; for a broader, a-historical or psychological, approach to "religious enthusiasm," see Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*. For the commonplace "Painting is like Poetry (and vice versa)" topos, and cognate arguments going on at the time of the formulation of Michelangelo's *Bacchus*, see Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis*; Mendelsohn, *Paragoni*; see also Barasch, *Theories of Art from Plato to Winckelmann*; Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators*, 39 ff.; Blunt, *Artistic Theory in Italy*, etc.; for these arguments in specific relation to our artist, see Clements, *Michelangelo's Theory*, ch. 4, "Comparison and Differentiation of the Arts," noting (p. 301) how "a Renaissance dogma held sculpture the major art, since God had practised it to form man."

possession is now clearly conceived in terms of a vigorous rhetorical allegorization, but not, however, as any serious religious conviction. Now, towards the end of the classical period, the visual artist achieves a complete assimilation with the modern concept of artistic inspiration [*Künstlerenthusiasmus*], and in this way an unquestionable connection with our modern conception of genius has finally been achieved.³³

Callistratus was certainly not the only ancient author to describe in detail the state of Bacchic *εκστασις*, or psychic possession; he was, however, unique in attaching his description to a *statue* (fig. 4), also thereby implying that its creator was an “artistic genius.” As all the historical evidence affirms, following the opportune execution of his own, otherwise unprecedented, rendering of a tipsy *Bacchus*, “fashioned by art in a manner not to be described,” thereafter Michelangelo was himself universally recognized as an “artistic genius,” even one credited with then-unique qualities solely to be accorded to the “divine artist.”

How Dionysiac “Inspiration” was Described in Classical Culture

Nonetheless, such “ecstasies” were familiar to several other writers of the late classical period. Therefore, by means of their own prestigious writings, the notion of frenzied “Dionysiac inspiration” became equally well known to Italian Humanists through standard texts. Among these, particularly significant is the way the Dionysiac syndrome was vividly recreated in Seneca’s *Agamemnon* and, likewise, in Lucan’s *Pharsalia*. For instance, in his *Agamemnon* (verses 710 ff.), the Chorus clinically describes what Seneca called a “bacchantic frenzy” exhibited in a “priestess of Phoebus,” so rendering in strictly verbal (also rather physiological) terms the pictorial equivalent of those ecstatic Maenads seen on so many ancient Greek vase paintings and reliefs.³⁴ (fig. 4) Such as she was pictured by Seneca,

Her cheeks are pale, and her whole body shakes. Her curls stiffen; her soft hair stands on end; her heart hisses frantically with a choking sound. Her glance wanders unsteady in different directions; her eyes seem to twist and turn inward, and then again just to stare motionless. Now she lifts her head up into the air, higher than usual, and walks

³³ Zilsel, *Entstehung des Geniebegriffes*, 34.

³⁴ For ancient representations of these ecstatic figures on Hellenic ceramics, see Carpenter, *Art and Myth in Ancient Greece*, figs. 9, 12, 49, 134, 274.

erect. Now she is getting ready to unseal her vocal chords against their will; now she tries to close her lips, but she cannot keep her words inside. *Here is a priestess in ecstasy*. . . . "Why [she cries] do you prick me with the goad of an unfamiliar madness? I have lost my mind; why do you sweep me away? Leave me, Phoebus [Apollo]! I am no longer yours! Extinguish the flame that you have kindled deep in my breast! What good does it do if I rush around like mad? *Who needs my bacchantic frenzy?*"

In Lucan's unfinished epic *Pharsalia* (5. 112 ff.), it was likewise explained that when "the god [Bacchus] enters someone's heart, premature death is the penalty or the reward for having received him; the human organism is then battered by the sting and the surge of ecstasy." Then follows Lucan's amazingly detailed, physiological-physiognomical, clinical picture of this kind of overwhelming, indeed awesome, Bacchic "ecstasy," the kind occurring at the climactic, even pseudo-sexual, orgasmic moment when the god:

takes over the soul of the priestess. Never before has he forced his way so fully into the body of a prophetess, driving out her normal consciousness and taking the place of everything that is human in her heart. Frantically, out of her mind, she runs through the sanctuary. Her neck no longer belongs to her; her bristling hair shakes off the fillets and garlands of Apollo as she whirls, tossing her head. . . . She boils over with a tremendous fire. . . . She sees everything; the first day and the last day of the world, the dimensions of the Ocean, the sum of the sands! . . .

Madness and ecstasy now begin to flow in earnest from her foaming lips. She moans and utters loud, inarticulate cries. . . . Her frenzy continues, and the god, who has not left her body, is still in control. Her eyes roll wildly, and her glance roams over the whole sky. The expressions on her face change constantly: now she looks frightened, now fierce and menacing. A fiery flush spreads over her features and colors her pale cheeks, but her pallor does not seem to indicate fear; rather it inspires it. Her heart is overtired, but cannot relax; voiceless sighs, sounding like the moaning of a turbulent sea after the North Wind has ceased to blow, still heave her breast. . . . She [finally] falls to the ground and barely recovers. . . .³⁵

Antedating these writings describing Bacchic "ecstasy," there was a long-standing iconographic tradition in the visual arts.³⁶ Appropriately,

³⁵ Seneca and Lucan, as quoted in Luck, *Arcana Mundi*, 276–78 (Seneca), 282–83 (Lucan); emphasis mine.

³⁶ For what immediately follows, see the essay on "The Tossed-Back Head" in

this frenzied motif first appears on Greek drinking cups of the late sixth century BCE, with these showing the raving maenads belonging to the Dionysiac consort. Shown with thyrsus in hand, the ecstatic dancer rushes forward, with her head flung back and with her long throat unnaturally extended. She was to retain this orgasmic pose for some eight centuries. Such inherent emotional instability naturally posed a problem for the sculptor. It was only after 400 BCE that Scopas, that most dramatic of all the ancient Greek sculptors, created a three-dimensional picture of the frenzied maenad tossing back her head (**fig. 4**). Although his work was lost, it is preserved in several copies. The original was recognized in its own time as exemplifying the artist's mastery of the depiction of intensely passionate delirium. This is testified to by an epigrammatic dialogue in the *Greek Anthology*: "Who carved this Bacchante? It was Scopas. And who filled her with wild delirium, Bacchus or Scopas? Scopas it was."

As we have seen, besides classical painters and sculptors, the classical authors were familiar with the image of a delirious woman flinging back her head and tossing her hair; this image they inevitably read as a concrete sign of *rapture*, *ecstasy*, and *possession*. In a long poem describing "The Wedding of Peleus and Thetis," the Roman poet Catullus presents Dionysus surrounded by dancing maenads (**fig. 4**), who, carried away by their Dionysiac madness, tear a bull to pieces, girdle themselves with serpents, and "fling their heads." The raving maenads were also often pictured by Ovid, and he even refers to a frenzied boy who emasculated himself while under their spell, and "His madness became a precedent, and the effeminate priests still mutilate themselves as they toss their hair" (*Fasti* IV, 244). Tacitus also mentions the tossing of hair as a climactic feature in a bacchanal (*Annals* XI, 3), and Heliiodorus has a "god-inspired" woman describe herself as "tossing my hair and [thus] imitating some person possessed by a spirit."

The figure of the "inspired," also frenzied, Bacchic maenad was also known to, and pictured by Renaissance artists. (**fig. 7**) For instance,

Barasch, *Imago Hominis*, 152–60, also citing (as I have), besides the apposite art-historical examples, quotations taken from the *Greek Anthology*, Catullus, Ovid, and Heliiodorus. For an eloquent analysis of ancient representations of the frenzied Bacchantes and Maenads, also making mention of some later artistic offspring, see Clark, *The Nude*, 358 ff., ch. 7, "Ecstasy"; see also Dodds, *Greeks and the Irrational*, 270–82, "Maenadism."

in the right side of the foreground of Titian's explicitly entitled *Bacchanal of the Andrians* (1518–19), we find an enraptured, nude Bacchante with flung-back head, a long, exposed neck, and with her arm stretched back in convulsive, wine-sodden ecstasy; her whole body is made tense by a god-infused experience transcending consciousness. (fig. 8) Another painter of eroticized mythological subjects was Antonio Correggio, and his *Jupiter and Io* (ca. 1532) shows how erotic climax and *unio mystica* may be conjoined, for instance when the naked and writhing Io blissfully submits to the cloudy embraces of Jove (or God). Therefore, and as is only logical, the ancient iconography of "possession" was also contextually applied to pictures with a clear-cut Christian message. (fig. 9) A prime example is Raphael's *Transfiguration of Christ* (ca. 1517), showing a "possessed" boy in the foreground who, with his neck bent and arms violently outstretched, bears witness to the refulgent ascension of Christ into heaven. Here, in creating his "convulsive" gesture of profoundly felt religious "ecstasy," Raphael was hewing to an eye-witness account: "Behold, a spirit seizes him [*spiritus apprehendit eum*], and he suddenly cries out; it convulses him till he foams, and it shatters him, and it will hardly leave him" (Luke 9:39).

Perhaps the best-known example of the conjoining of an explicit *unio mystica* with an implicitly orgasmic erotic climax is that one depicted in Gian-Lorenzo Bernini's aptly named *Ecstasy of Santa Teresa* (1645–1652). (fig. 10) Reclining in complete passivity, her spiritual "rapture" is graphically conveyed by her thrown-back head, her curved neck, her unseeing eyes, and her parted lips, from which "moans" are understood to be issuing.³⁷ In this case, Bernini was also hewing to an eye-witness account, and as just as this was recounted by no less than Santa Teresa of Avila (1515–1582). Her precociously clinical description of her god-possessed "ecstasy" merits a lengthy citation:

This conjoining of pain and glory [*pena y gloria junta*] so bewildered me that I could not comprehend how there could be such an experience. . . . The soul clearly sees that this love [*amor*] has come into it through no action of its own, rather that out of the very great love that the Lord had for it a spark seems suddenly to have fallen upon it and set it all on fire [*la hace toda arder*] . . . There are times when the

³⁷ For contemporary (and conventional) applications of this "ecstatic" condition, both plastic and poetic, see Petersson, *The Art of Ecstasy*.

impulses are so strong that the soul can do absolutely nothing. The entire body contracts; neither foot nor arm can be moved. If one is standing at the time, one falls into a sitting position as though transported [*se sienta como una cosa transportada*], and one cannot even take a breath. One only utters a few slight moans [*gemidos*], not aloud, for that is impossible, but inwardly, out of pain.

Our Lord was pleased that I should sometimes see a vision of this kind. Beside me, on the left hand, there appeared an angel in bodily form, such as I am not in the habit of seeing, except very rarely. Though I often have visions of angels, I do not see them. They come to me only after the manner of the first type of vision that I described. But it was our Lord's will that I should see this angel in the following way. He was not tall but short, and very beautiful; and his face was so aflame that he appeared to be one of the highest rank of angels, who seem to be all on fire. They must be of the kind called cherubim, but they do not tell me their names. I know very well that there is a great difference between some angels and others, and between these and others still, but I could not possibly explain it.

In his hands I saw a great golden spear [*un dardo de oro largo*] and, at the iron tip, there appeared to be a point of fire. This [phallus-like device] he plunged into my heart several times—so that it penetrated to my very entrails [*me llegaba a las entrañas*]. When he pulled it out, I felt that he took them with it, and he left me utterly consumed by the great love of God [*me dejaba toda abrasada en amor grande de Dios*]. The pain was so severe that it made me utter several moans. The sweetness [*la suavidad*, like an orgasm] caused by this intense pain is so extreme that one cannot possibly wish it to cease [*no hay desear que se quite*], nor is one's soul then content with anything but God. This is not a physical, but a spiritual pain, even though the body has some share in it—even a considerable share. This is a most gentle wooing [*un requiebro tan suave*], one which takes place between God and the soul, so that if anyone thinks I am lying, I pray God, in His goodness, to grant that person the enjoyment of it [*que lo dé a gustar*].

Throughout the days that this experience lasted I went about in a kind of stupor. I had no wish to look or to speak, only to embrace my pain, which was a greater bliss than all created things could give me. On several occasions, when I was in this state, the Lord was pleased that I should experience raptures [*arrobamientos*], and so deeply that I could not resist them—even though I was not alone. Greatly to my distress, therefore, my raptures began to be talked about. Since I have had them, I have ceased to feel this pain so much, though I still feel the pain that I spoke of in a previous chapter—I do not remember which. The latter is very different in many respects, and it is much more valuable. But when this pain, of which I am now speaking, begins, the Lord seems to transport the soul and throw it into an ecstasy [*parece arrebatada el Señor el alma y la pone en éstasis*]. So there is no oppor-

tunity for it to feel its pain or suffering, for the [orgasmic] enjoyment only comes later [*viene luego el gozar*]. May He be blessed for ever, He who has granted so many favors to one who has so ill repaid.³⁸

Thus we see how ancient Bacchic "ecstasy" had metamorphosized into an eventually orthodox format for that essential Christian goal, the *unio mystica*. And at every stage of the evolution there was a talented artist willing and able to give tangible form to the ineffable experience (**fig. 10**).

Returning to our targeted Renaissance art-work (**fig. 1**), the nearly inevitable conclusion is that, with his *Bacchus*, Michelangelo had been "inspired" to a timely sculptural *mimesis* by means of a now identifiable, and especially vivid, *ekphrasis*. Particularly this means that the image was largely drawn from those standard (but unnamed) "ancient writers" cited by Condivi. It presently appears that these *scrittori antichi* were principally Pliny, perhaps Vitruvius, and most likely also Callistratus. In any event, we know that Callistratus was the only classical author who had ever explicitly attributed Inspiration (*Enthousiasmon*) to any *sculptor*.³⁹ Two comments, made decades later, by Gian Paolo Lomazzo suggest that such ideas were likewise held by informed art critics in regards to Michelangelo's *Bacchus*. As he remarked offhandedly in his *Trattato dell'Arte* (1584), there was even then a direct link understood to exist between the Florentine's early masterwork and prototypes executed by celebrated Greek sculptors, especially Skopas and Praxiteles, and such as their lost masterpieces so vividly appeared in Callistratus's *ekphraseis*. According to Lomazzo, "The type of 'Bacchus' was mainly established in Cnidos by Bryaxis and Skopas with such skill as corresponds to Praxiteles's 'Aphrodite' and, likewise, to 'the modern Bacchus' [*il Bacco moderno*], the one made in Rome by

³⁸ Santa Teresa de Jesús, *Libro de su Vida*, 237–58; *The Life of Saint Teresa*, 209–11. If the reader has any doubts about the "orgasmic" character of Teresa's experiences, then *he* (but not she, for being already well aware of the nature of such things) should read the first-hand (and post-medieval) accounts given in Shere Hite's *The Hite Report*, esp. 61 ff. ("Masturbation").

³⁹ For the singularity of Callistratus in attributing "enthusiasm" to the sculptor's art, see Barasch, *Theories of Art*, 33; Zilsel, *Geniebegriff*, 34. For the classical concept of creative "inspiration," a topic which has sorely needed monographic treatment for the exact manner of its *later* revival in the Renaissance (and subsequent modifications, even afterwards into the 20th century), see Dodds, *Greeks and the Irrational*; see also Bundy, *Theory of Imagination*; Panofsky, *Idea*.

Michelangelo for Jacopo Galli the Roman.”⁴⁰ Lomazzo also attributes the following statement to Michelangelo, so documenting his long-standing interest in Praxiteles as a paragon of the sculptor’s art:

Finding himself once at Monte Cavallo in Rome, he [Michelangelo] had more or less the following words to say [to me], that “Modern painters and sculptors ought to have proportions and measures right in their eyes in order to put them into execution.” Wishing to point out that this [proportionate] science had been lost among the moderns, he made a comparison to those marvelous statues of the classical artists, such as those of Phidias and Praxiteles [*quelle di Fidia e Prassitele*] located there in Rome.⁴¹

We now recall that Condivi’s description of the *Bacchus* suggested inclusion of such measured and proportionate *Scientia* (or underlying theory), even the “perfect number” (*teleion*) praised by Vitruvius. Elsewhere, Lomazzo made yet another important connection, but only in passing and thus revealing an additional commonplace association, one existing in his mind between Bacchus, Apollo and the Muses, all of whom, he casually affirms, equally “rule over poetic madness [*poetico furore*].”⁴² By attempting competitive mimesis through ekphrastic

⁴⁰ Lomazzo, *Scritti sulle arti*, II (“Trattato dell’Arte”), 542: “Bacco fu . . . principalmente scolpito in Gnido di mano di Briaixi e di Scopas, con tanta maestria, che concorrevano con la Venere di Prassitele, e del [Bacco per il] moderno Buonarroti in Roma [patronato] per Jacobo Galli romano.” As the editor notes, Lomazzo’s immediate source for the Greek artists, which he misread, was presumably the modern mythographer Lillio Giraldis (whom I shall later quote in another context), but the source, in Giraldis, actually stated “Liber pater Briaxidis et alter Scopae et Minerva,” so the additional mention of Praxiteles must represent Lomazzo’s reiteration of certain conventions, or *topoi*, belonging to Michelangelo’s fame, a conclusion borne out by the citation immediately following. For the *Dionysios of Knidos* by Bryaxis, see Pliny, *NH* 36:22, immediately followed by descriptions, already quoted, of the two *Cupids* by Praxiteles, the second one being ejaculated upon by the wretched Alketas of Rhodes.

⁴¹ Lomazzo, *Scritti*, II, 288; the index to this edition of Lomazzo’s collected writings shows numerous other references to Praxiteles, including mention of the *Aphrodite of Knidos*, and its repellent admirer, he who “se ne innamorò sì fattamente, che gli lasciò sin un fianco la macchia del desiderio suo” (*Trattato*, 490), and the modern editor, R. P. Ciardi, goes on to observe how “l’aneddoto [masturbatorio] ebbe grande diffusione nella storiografia artistica dell’500,” and cites various Cinquecento examples of the egregious ejaculatory *topos*. Another one I have found, in Benedetto Varchi’s *Due Lezzione* (1549), directly ties a drawing of *Venus*, here attributed to Michelangelo, to “la Venere di Prassitele”: Varchi, as in Barrocchi (ed.), *Scritti d’arte del Cinquecento*, 538; for yet another, see Dolce, as quoted in Chapter 2 (n. 37).

⁴² Lomazzo, *Scritti*, II, 627: mentioning “le Muse con Apollo, o con Bacco, già che l’antichità ebbe ambedue [sic: ambedue] per sovrani al poetico furore.” Curiously, although providing an admirably exhaustive listing of classical texts referring to Dionysios-Bacchus, Lee, “Gardens and Gods,” 90–170, does not really pursue the

description, especially such as may be hypothesized in the particular case of his celebrated *Bacchus*, Michelangelo (as apparently coached initially by Poliziano) additionally appears to have figuratively represented himself as a "*Praxiteles Redivivus*." If so, he was proudly competing—as an "inspired" sculptor—with another standard topos, that commonplace applied to outstanding Renaissance painters, and which would have them figuratively represent so many "Reborn Apelles."⁴³

*Ancient Evaluations of "Enthusiastic Inspiration"
and Poetic Creativity*

According to typically modernist conclusions, for instance as expressed by André Breton (among many others), "automatism" (*l'automatisme psychique*) presently represents something like the instrument of a higher power manifesting itself as an "irresistible" creative impulse within the artist. Moreover, this kind of convulsive modernist automatism, whether literary or artistic in its eventual execution, becomes a function of, or is even justified by "*inspiration*." As was additionally implied much earlier by various Roman and Greek authors, it was just such an inherent factor of "inspiration" that functioned as an understood condition impelling "fantasy" (*phantasia*). The conjunction of Inspiration and Fantasy represents a crucial circumstance that uniquely allows the artist, by his very "nature" (*physis*, in this case, "innate genius") "to see" an otherwise invisible "art" (*techne*) potentially lying in his raw materials. In short, it is this ubiquitous notion of "Inspiration" which so obviously represents the real core-idea, taken as "artistic theory," that finally links together in modernist theoretical writings even such essentially workshop or artisan techniques as "automatism" and "chance." Accordingly, it proves useful quickly

important Bacchic theme of "poetic furor," emerging ca. 1480 in Florence, which is only mentioned in passing by her (on p. 125). My conclusion, to the contrary, is that *this* was perhaps the most significant Bacchic theme for Renaissance Neoplatonists, particularly for those working in Florence (e.g., Michelangelo), and as will be demonstrated in various contemporary texts quoted here.

⁴³ For the mostly legendary Apelles and his figurative reincarnations, see Cast, *The Calumny of Apelles*; Förster, "Die Verleumdung des Apelles in der Renaissance"; Kennedy, "Apelles Redivivus"; Kris and Kurz, *Die Legende vom Künstler*, 49–50 (with the major textual citations); Massing, *Du texte à l'image* (all of which also bear on the issue of "ekphrasis"; cf. ch. 2, n. 34).

to sketch out other aspects of the history of that now ubiquitous concept of autonomous vision in ways that complement our previous Bacchic-Dionysiac recitations and conclusions.

Our first clue as to the real significance of the term, at least in its present-day context, is revealed by its current, meaning absolutely commonplace, dictionary definitions. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the literal action contained in the verb *inspire* is: “To infuse some thought or feeling into (a person, etc.), as if by breathing [from *inspirare*]; to animate or actuate by some mental or spiritual sense.” This idea naturally leads to its special, or “theological sense”: “To influence or actuate by a special divine or supernatural agency. . . . To impart, communicate, or suggest by special divine or supernatural agency; used especially in reference to the utterances of prophets and apostles, and the writings of Scripture.” The resulting noun, or immediate physical-psychological result, is “*inspiration*,” having the general sense of: “A breathing in or infusion of some idea, purpose, etc. into the mind . . . especially of an exalted kind.” The special sense of this noun is: “A special immediate action or influence of the spirit of God (or of some divinity or supernatural being) . . . said especially of that divine influence under which [for instance] the books of Scripture are held to have been written.”

In fact, and as attested to by unimpeachable scriptural authority, the first human being ever created—a chap named Adam—was himself (and literally so) “inspired.” The first-ever recorded act of creative “inspiration” is recorded in the Book of Genesis (1:1; 2: 4, 7):

In die quo fecit Dominus Deus caelum et terram [. . .] Formavit igitur Dominus Deus hominem de limo terrae, et INSPIRAVIT in faciem eius spiraculum vitae, et factus est homo in animam viventem.

On that day, when the Lord God made heaven and earth [. . .] the Lord God [next] shaped [*formavit*, like a sculptor] a man from the mud of the earth; and into the face [of His clay model] He INSPIRED the breath of life, and so was transformed [the terra-cotta figurine of] the man into a living soul. (my translation).

I have quoted from the Latin text of the *Biblia Vulgata* (here translated verbatim) since this was the only version of the Book of Genesis read by (or to) Christian Europeans before the sixteenth century. According to my interpolated transcription of the canonical scenario, one would have perceived a fairly obvious artistic context—*sculpture*—the kind also making explicit reference to an act of literally “inspired creation,” and as deftly performed by none other than the Divine Mind.

Clearly, the doctrine of Inspiration, even when strictly viewed as an "aesthetic" factor, goes back to very ancient times.⁴⁴ In the Introduction to the *Theogony* (written ca. 750 BC), the ancient Greek poet Hesiod tells us how, while he was tending his flocks on Mount Helicon, the Muses had "breathed" into him (or "inspired" him with) the art of divine music.⁴⁵ From the outset, the operations of *inspiration* were taken seriously by the Greeks because, for them, they expressed the exuberance of mythological imagery. They held this inspirational principle, which they called *enthousiasmos*—literally meaning "inspired, actually breathed into, by the gods"—to represent a form of "possession" by some divine force located *outside* of the artist-writer. It was recognized, literally, to be a prophetic process arising from *εκστασις*, "ecstasy," literally signifying the act of "stepping out of one's self." The highest form of *ekstasis* resulted in the transcendental union of the soul with the divinity, or One (Plato's *Nous* or Nietzsche's *Einheit*). At such liminal moments, one experiences *apocalypsis* (αποκαλυψις), or an "uncovering." The recognized Latin equivalent for an "apocalypse" was *revelatio*, or "revelation" in English. The prophetic gift was, additionally, commonly spoken of as a kind of madness, or *manía* (from *mainomai*, to be mad or insane), for being an emotional condition sited outside of the bounds of ordinary reason.⁴⁶

Various surviving, ancient texts provide useful clinical descriptions of the outward signs of prophetic *enthousiasm-inspiration*. According to one of the most detailed, as given (ca. AD 330) by Iamblicus (*On the Mysteries of Egypt*, 3. 5, 11),

In their state of divine possession they [who are inspired] are no longer in their normal state of consciousness, so that they no longer lead the normal life of a person, of a creature, as far as sense perception and volition are concerned. They exchange these [normal states of consciousness] for another, more divine kind of [mental] life, that which inspires and possesses them completely. . . . The outward signs of divine

⁴⁴ For some bibliography on "Inspiration," see ch. 1, n. 1.

⁴⁵ Hesiod, *Homeric Hymns and Homeric*, 78–81 (with Greek text).

⁴⁶ For "enthousiasmos" in classical culture, see Zilsel, *Die Entstehung des Geniebegriffs*, 12–22, 101–5; for its wider religious applications much later, see Knox, *Enthusiasm*. For more on the cultural acceptance of "madness" (in general) by the ancient Greeks, see Dodds, *Greeks and the Irrational*; Simon, *Mind and Madness in Ancient Greece*; for the historical texts, also including good contextual introductions, see Luck, *Arcana Mundi*, 229 ff., "Divination." For literary treatments of post-Hellenistic kinds of creative (or sometimes destructive) "madness," see Feder, *Madness in Literature*; Porter, *A Social History of Madness*.

possession are manifold: [involuntary or “automatic” production of] movement of the body or of some of its parts, or total lack of any kind of movement; [production of] harmonious tunes, dances, melodious voices, or the [discordant] opposites of these. Bodies have been seen to rise up or grow larger, or to float in the air, and the opposites of these phenomena have also been observed. The voice [of the possessed person] seemed to be completely even in volume and in the intervals between sound and silence, and then again there was unevenness. In other instances, the sounds swelled and diminished, but occasionally something else happened.

Iamblicus then makes the important point that “inspiration” is essential to the prophetic act, that it is an indispensable trait of ecstatic religious experience, the kind of “possession” allowing you to meet (“receive”) God face to face:

It [inspiration] comes all of a sudden and it uses the prophet as an instrument. He is no longer himself and has no idea of what he says or where he is. As a result, even after having delivered the prophecy, he recovers with difficulty. . . . By keeping himself aloof and distant from human preoccupations, he renders himself pure and ready to receive the god. Therefore, he possesses the inspiration of the god that shines into the pure sanctuary of his soul. The inspiration can take possession [of him] without hindrance, and the perfect presence finds no obstacle.⁴⁷

Accordingly, besides having potential literary applications, this literally irrational principle—*enthousiasmos-inspiratio*—was commonly put into the same class of psychic phenomena as hysteria, possession, ecstasy, religious frenzy, and the prophetic utterances of the oracles. During the classical era, therefore, the perceived experience of Inspiration was then always generically related to “religious” experience.

As shall be shown shortly, it was to be the modernist art critics of the Symbolist period who, just over a century ago, overtly restored the original *religious* connection existing between inspiration and art-making, Dionysus and ecstasy, so linking divine intuition and transcendental initiation to the practice of contemporary artists. So doing, consciously or not, the Symbolists were only following ancient precedent. Particularly in the *Ion* and the *Phaedrus* (which we have already examined in other Dionysiac contexts), it was observed how Plato

⁴⁷ Iamblichus, as quoted in Luck, *Arcana Mundi*, 299, 301; compare this “ancient” clinical description with its “modern” analogue, for instance, Rawcliffe, *Psychology of the Occult*.

repeatedly speaks of "poetry" (*poiësis*), meaning—in his time—what we would now generically call "Art." He directly allies ποιέσις—literally, "making-creating"—with inspired utterance, and so he raises the poets (*poiëtai*, or "makers-creators") to a special status approaching divinity. Certain minor female divinities, that is, Hesiod's Muses, represent an alternative source of supernatural power and, so empowered, they "inspire" the poet, he who in his turn "inspires" the audience, or fills them with "enthusiasm."

Moreover, as described by Plato (*Phaedrus* 244A–245A), both artistic poet and religious prophet are seen as "madmen," for both are equally "enraptured" by divine inspiration. Plato also states that such non-rational *inspiration* even serves an educational purpose:

A third type of possession and madness is possession by the Muses. When this [*furor divinus*] seizes upon a gentle and virgin soul [of the poet] it rouses it to inspired expression. . . . But if a man comes to the door of poetry untouched by the madness of the Muses, believing that technique alone will make him a good poet, he and his sane compositions never reach perfection, but are utterly eclipsed by the performances of the inspired madman.⁴⁸

In fine, although having different terminology, Platonic "divine fury" is just what was demanded by André Breton, a modern theorist who, in typically orthodox-modernist fashion, demands from all proper art-making "the absence of any control exercised by reason." The only difference is that, now, you probably call the ancient *furor divinus* "Psychic Automatism."

How "Inspiration" is Described by Modern Science

Most of our source-texts describing the pathology of "Inspiration" are literally ancient, for many of these were written down well over two millennia ago. Today, it is not so much the philosophers, also neither the art critics, who have the better grasp of this process, the one taken

⁴⁸ *Phaedrus* (245A), as in Plato, *Phaedrus*, 48. For medieval exponents of the theory of the "Poet's Divine Frenzy," see Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, 474–75. What the Muses literally inspired was, of course, "music" (*mousiké*), another major form of often literally "inspired" artistic expression which should (some day) be historically treated as is my current topic; for a wide-ranging collection of important primary documents, historically discussed and usefully arranged according to one of my complementary issues, "esotericism," see Godwin, *Music, Mysticism and Magic*.

to be the very basis of all artistic creativity; instead the age-old topic of *inspiration* is now better put into the hands of a distinctively modern kind of professional, the scientists. Among these modernist savants, it is particularly the mental technologists who call themselves “psychologists” who have particularly interested themselves in the etiology of “Inspiration.” Given the nature of their professional formation, their perhaps inevitable conclusion is that, naturally, “it’s all in your head.”

A pioneer researcher in the strictly psychological aspects of creativity was Ernst Kris (1900–1957). Referring to “Inspiration,” and just as I have done, he initially pointed out that “the *literal* meaning is best illustrated by the narrative in Gen. ii, 7 [as given in the King James Version]: ‘And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed [*inspiravit*] into his nostrils the breath of life: and man became a living soul’.” That stated, Kris then deals with the wholly post-scriptural meaning of the universal psychological processes pertaining to the strictly “clinical aspects of these states” belonging to Inspiration. Perhaps to our alarm, we find that:

They sometimes show characteristics of epileptic or—perhaps more frequently—hystero-epileptic states (*morbus sacer*), or else a more or less complicated hysterical symptom formation. But while there seems to be a certain variety of clinical syndromes which may predispose [certain individuals] to these states, the psychological conception of the belief in *inspiration* and the processes occurring in it aims at a solution that will not be limited to any one of these clinical conditions. These highly complex processes may be described as “phenomena of regression.” In clinical cases, this regression is likely to lead to a withdrawal of ego control from many of the higher mental activities. As an example, we [often observe] that the coordination of motor activities is frequently affected.

Immediately following, Dr. Kris gets to the contemporary crux of our on-going investigation, namely, the modern expression of ancient notions of *inspiration* as *psychic automatism*:

As for another most characteristic feature, in states of *inspiration* speech becomes *automatic*. It is not the subject who speaks but [his inspiration is instead described as being] a voice from outside of him. The pronouncements of this voice arising from him are unknown before the state of inspiration has arisen. It is [actually] the voice of his unconscious that he communicates to others, and he himself becomes part of the public. In such communications the unconscious is supreme. These are always prophecy or poetry of some kind. . . . In a state similar to that of intoxication, elated, in a trance, and not conscious of

what he does—thus states Plato, to whom we owe the first description of the state of *inspiration*—the poet sings his songs. The voice of God speaks through him to men. . . . The state nearest to *inspiration* is *ecstasy* [when] ego and God are one. . . . [In ecstasy and/or inspiration] the driving of the unconscious toward consciousness is experienced as an intrusion from without—an attitude of a passive nature *par excellence*. The decisive difference, however, can be formulated more clearly. In *ecstasy*, the process results in an emotional climax only; in states of *inspiration*, it leads to active elaboration in [artistic] creation.

Whether or not the "inspiration" is accredited with a specifically divine origin, Kris recognized that we are actually dealing with a literary convention, a *topos*:

In many autobiographical descriptions, especially [as given by] poets or artists, we hear that the creative states are states of special excitement. This excitement may be favored by certain conditions and it may be evoked by certain stimuli, but as a rule it cannot be controlled altogether. In these conditions the individual may feel more or less elated or depressed, extremely vital or ill. The act of creation becomes extremely easy, sometimes progressing at a great speed, and a feeling arises that "the real work is done by some unseen collaborator" (R. L. Stevenson).

As Kris also recognized, *inspiration* is also typically accompanied by the fortuitous *chance* finding:

Some of the greatest scientific discoveries are attributed to *chance* by the discoverers themselves, just as Newton's observation of a falling apple is alleged to have been the source of his discovery of the law of gravitation. A closer analysis of such cases, which play a considerable part in typical biographies of scientists, has, as Paulhan (*Psychologie de l'invention*, 1901) has shown, proved beyond all doubt that what appears to be "chance" is, in fact, an observation impregnated with previous pre-conscious experiences. The making of the [chance] observation is in itself a part of the preconscious process. In the words of Louis Pasteur: "Le hasard ne favorise que les esprits préparés." The idea, however, that the discovery originated from the observation, which chance had offered [to the investigator], and that the whole of the mental process involved was indeed started by chance, and [moreover] through an "inspiration," deserves some further comment. *Chance* is always tinged by the conception of fate. It stands for what in religious terms may be called the will of God, in the last analysis for God himself. And thus our path seems to have led us back to the problem of *inspiration* itself.

As further explained by the erudite psychologist some two and a half millennia after Plato had first defined it, *inspiration*, including its momentous "chance" inventions, now simply becomes

a certain disposition to communicate with the repressed wishes and fantasies in themselves by the use of special mechanisms. These mechanisms are in the nature of projection and introjection. What comes from inside is believed to come from without. The “voice of the unconscious” is externalized and becomes the voice of God, who speaks through the mouth of the chosen. This process of externalization constitutes one decisive element of the phenomenon of inspiration.

As Kris summarizes his argument,

In the concept of *inspiration*, impulses, wishes and fantasies derived from the unconscious are [typically] attributed to a supernatural being, and the process for their becoming conscious is experienced as an action of this [supernatural] being upon the [human] subject, and thus *activity* is turned into *passivity*. . . . Two main purposes seem to be served by the belief in *inspiration*: one concerns its social and the other its individual aspect. Through the idea of inspiration the communication gains in authority, and [hence] the person who communicates it is relieved of the burden of responsibility. The increase in authority is best exemplified if we think of the concept of revelation. The revealed truth is of a quality other than that of truth acquired through human responsibility. *It is beyond criticism as well as beyond doubt.*⁴⁹

Other modern psychologists investigating the ancient phenomenon of “Inspiration,” with this experience often producing the fortuitous example of invention by “chance,” would be even more blunt in their conclusions. For instance, the emotional phenomena recorded in the previously quoted texts written by classical-era authors which describe “ecstatic” visionary experiences and “poetic possession” would today most likely be simply labeled “hysteria” by a modern scientist, yet another psychologist. According to Dr. D. H. Rawcliffe, a British researcher, the components of “pathological *hysteria*” include the diverse, but generally picturesque, effects of:

increased suggestibility which, together with a naturally uncritical state of mind, makes the creation of *delusions* in the subject’s mind a relatively easy matter; and a whole host of accompanying psychological anomalies, such as vivid and sudden alterations in personality, temporary loss of identity, paralysis, local analgesia or localized insensitivity, *automatic writing*, *involuntary speaking* (“*inspiration*”), the onset of a variety of functional diseases (and often their sudden cure), somnambulism, during which the individual carries out actions without being able to

⁴⁹ Kris, *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art*, Chapter 13, “On Inspiration” (quoting here from pp. 289–97, 302; my emphases).

remember them subsequently, *visual hallucination* or "*visions*," *auditory hallucination*—including the hearing of "*voices*," and occasionally hyper-acuity of the senses; to these anomalies there may be added a greatly heightened histrionic ability.

Analogous manifestations are seen in different and less developed forms in the *mediumistic trance*; in *xenoglossia*—the uncontrollable utterance of unintelligible sounds under the influence of mystical or religious excitement, known euphemistically as "speaking in unknown tongues [or voices]"; in *automatic writing*; in *somnambulism* or sleep-walking and *somniloquism*, or talking in sleep; in the *demoniacal possession* of the Middle Ages; in *hysterical inspiration* or *automatic speech*, usually on religious, mystical or moral themes; and in *hysterical* [Bacchic-type] *frenzy*, which is deliberately induced by many primitive sects, notably some dervish cults. All these dissociative phenomena may be followed by partial or total amnesia of the dissociative period.⁵⁰

Such was the opinion rendered in 1952 by a modern scientist, a clinical psychologist working in Britain, regarding these kind of other-worldly experiences. Although she claimed no exceptional poetic gifts, but since she had repeatedly "heard voices," we may now call Joan of Arc a singularly "inspired" political figure. Nonetheless, we have read how the "Ancients" (then called, in Greek and Latin, the *archaios*, *palaios*, *antiquus*, *vetus*, *priscus*), and even though they employed wholly different terminology from that used by modern psychologists, had long before similarly described the inspired and ecstatic, creative or "poetic" condition. Now, however, and long after, we presently have yet another new, *scientific*, and apparently even *quantifiable*, explanation for *ecstatic possession*, "inspiration" in short. And now this assumption may be either applied to the traditional religious experience, or to the way "ecstasy" now triggers praiseworthy creative energy, in either the modernist literary or visual-plastic arts.

Recently published medical research casts new light on the physical (or merely mundane and mechanical) processes which are actually at work in the typically convulsive process called *Inspiration* by the ancient writers.⁵¹ As newly voiced by a typical modern recipient of what may be called a classic "mystical experience," he or she typically believes that "I had been graced by a comprehension of the ultimate nature of things." Explained in another manner, during the mystical experience

⁵⁰ Rawcliffe, *Occult and Supernatural Phenomena*, 49, 60 (emphasis mine).

⁵¹ For what immediately follows, see Begley, "Religion and the Brain" (and citing recently published monographs).

sensory awareness fades out, and the percipient is only left with his or her pure consciousness, absolute interiority. Well and good, but the scientists have lately sought to explore the neurological—or strictly mechanical—underpinnings of the mystical, typically “inspirational,” spiritual experience. In a nutshell, they use brain-imaging data (SPECT: single-photon emission-computed tomography) to identify what seems to be the brain’s “spirituality center,” so explaining, among other phenomena, why religious rituals unquestionably have the power to profoundly move believers.

Particularly it is *ritual*—drumming, dancing, chanting—which rivets attention upon a single, intense source of sensory stimulation, and that narrowly focused attention—and as it is inevitably accompanied by heightened emotionality—which excludes all other sensory stimuli. In this new scientific discipline, often called “neurotheology,” technicians try to pinpoint *which* regions of the brain turn on, and which turn off, during mystical experiences that seem to exist outside time and space. It had already been demonstrated, and nearly fifty years ago, that, yes, brain waves do change when one meditates, but, since neuro-imaging did not exist then, there was no explanation of *which* regions in the brain lay behind the registered changes. Presently, SPECT images taken of the brains of volunteer mystics provide photographs of their transcendent experiences.

Specifically, the prefrontal lobe, the seat of attention, “lights up,” and literally so, as vividly shown in SPECT images. Particularly striking (and unexpected) was a quieting of mental activity elsewhere; a bundle of neurons in the superior parietal lobe, located toward the top and back of the brain, went “dark,” so showing itself to be “turned off.” It had, in fact, been shut down by the hippocampus, the cerebral area which is charged with maintaining emotional equilibrium. In moments of stress—including the psychic stress brought on by ritualistic stimuli—the hippocampus inhibits the flow of signals between neurons, for instance, those within the superior parietal lobe. Now known as the “orientation association area” (OAA), this region processes information about space and time. Particularly, the OAA determines perceptions of where the individual’s body ends, and where the rest of the world around him—space itself—actually begins. During the mystical-inspirational experience, this area shuts down and, bereft of sensory data, the individual then loses the distinction between “the self” and “the not-self.” As a result of his

OAA having been shut down, the perceiver mechanically, or "automatically," perceives himself as "endless," or as inhabiting infinity, and of being intimately interwoven with everything.

Further SPECT analyses have explained the actual physiology of "automatically" occurring "visions," particularly the kind arising during prayer or ritual. Put simply, these are also generated in the OAA, but more specifically within the temporal lobes; nestling along the sides of the head, these house the mechanical circuits responsible for language, conceptual thinking and associations. Cerebral imaging additionally shows the specific geographical location allowing for hearing "the voice of God" to be "Broca's area." Similarly, "visions" may be artificially stimulated by electrical stimulation of the temporal lobes. The generation of the medieval sort of visionary experience is now done by placing over the head of a volunteer a helmet specially fitted with electromagnets; this device generates a weak magnetic field, and the magnetic energy stimulates electrical activity within the temporal lobes. So equipped, then the volunteers verbally describe the results of their "out-of-body experiences" or, equally routinely, their overwhelming sense of a divine presence.

But one need not be literally wired to "see God"; similar experiences can be triggered by such mundane stimuli as anxiety, personal crisis, lack of oxygen, fasting, with this producing low blood sugar (hypoglycemia), and even simple fatigue. The other findings deriving from this on-going research suggest that some people may be temperamentally, perhaps even genetically, predisposed to mystical experiences, meaning that their brains are "wired" in a way that other people's brains are not. For instance, in 1999, Australian researchers found that people who spontaneously report mystical visions and spiritual experiences tend to have unusually easy mechanical access to their subliminal consciousness. This process is called "dissociation," and it explains what happens in the artificially-induced trance state now called "hypnosis." Typically, dissociative individuals are usually imaginatively innovative, that is, they display a tendency toward "fantasy," hence these are particularly "creative" individuals.

And yet another new explanation of *Inspiration* currently holds that such familiar states of religious ecstasy and creative transport are really due to a *chemical* imbalance! As is now credibly explained by a British anthropologist,

As is well known, trance states can be readily induced in most normal people by a wide range of stimuli, applied either separately or in combination. . . . The most exciting [recent] scientific discoveries here, surely, are those of the *endorphins*—natural opiates in the human brain—whose production and release is promoted by the traditional methods of trance induction. . . . One of the most intriguing research interfaces here concerns the potential role of the human endorphin system—as a natural source of euphoria and analgesia—which is readily triggered by sensory stimulation (including such mundane activity as jogging) and, paradoxically, by sensory deprivation.

The discovery of these endogenous opiates in the human body gives a literal sense to Marx's famous epithet about religion as "the opiate of the people," which is one that he could never have imagined. This clearly adds a new dimension to understanding one set of probable precipitants of religious [even creative] experiences. Equally obviously, it does not, however, explain the form of religious [or artistic!] experience: the specific spiritual terms in which such *ecstasy* is understood, represented and communicated.⁵²

Even granted the new "Endorphin Factor" (and I even confess myself to be a post-modernist "endorphin junkie"), the reiterated psychological traits characterizing endless reports of visionary creativity betray standard features pertaining to classical-era descriptions of *inspiratio* or *enthousiasmos*. It was clearly implied by Plato that the utterances of the poet-prophet are essentially "automatic" in character, and this happens because, as a price for having privileged access to "truth," the poet-prophet must forego consciousness: "Every man, while he retains possession of that [his conscious reason], is powerless to compose a verse or chant an oracle" (nor, one supposes, to say a sooth). Therefore, Plato has Socrates exclaim that it is "not by art that they [poets] utter these things, but by divine influence" (*Ion* 534C).

Consequently, the inspired, hence "automatist," poet-oracle enshrined in classical literary theory must submit to being rapt beyond his senses, and so he necessarily loses control of his personal identity, or rational being. Such is the conventional wisdom, the essential creation-myth, operative since the time of Plato. To carry the understood argument further, the poet-prophet-artist is actually little more than a mindless vehicle of divine infusion, a passive amanuensis obediently recording and transmitting the dictates of an external, often supernatural,

⁵² Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*, 10, 34. For, however, a recent, generally critical, assessment of the theory of chemical imbalances in the brain as the cause of mental imbalance, see Valenstein, *Blaming the Brain*.

will. Times change, and so do the creation-myths generated by different historical cultures. Living in a world amazed by the wonders wrought by modern scientific endeavor, as we would now claim, the poet-prophet-artist is simply a creature more plentifully endowed with *endorphins* than are the usual run-of-the-mill, non-creative folk. If not due to "hysteria," then over-the top creativity is simply a matter of chemical imbalance; hence, alas, it is not the work of the gods.

CHAPTER FOUR

POST-CLASSICAL AND CHRISTIAN “INSPIRATION”

A Depiction of Classical “Inspiration” in Medieval Art

The heroic scholarly task undertaken by Ernst Robert Curtius (1886–1956) was to demonstrate the continuity of a pan-European cultural tradition, one running from Homer to Goethe, and the culminating work of his career was his monumental study of *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* (1948; *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, 1953). Here he briefly treated the theory of the poet’s “divine frenzy.” As we saw (in Chapters 2 and 3), this model had been initially set forth in Plato’s *Phaedrus*. Although the European Middle Ages did not directly know this originating text, Curtius demonstrated that, nonetheless, its message was to be found throughout late Antiquity in a diluted form, and then it was passed on to the Middle Ages as a cultural commonplace, a *topos*, just as had been other elements of antique mythology.

Curtius cited several examples illustrating the medieval *Nachleben* of the commonplace idea of poetic divine frenzy.¹ Among standard classical texts known to medieval scholarship we have, for instance, Horace (65–8 BCE), who once regarded himself as the victim of an “amiable insanity” (*amabilis insania*: *Carmina*, III, 4, 5), and, on another occasion (*Carmina*, III, 25), he described himself as being literally “carried away” by Bacchus. And in the *Ars poetica* (vv. 455), Horace had likened poetic creativity to “the accursed itch which plagues a man” (*mala quem scabies aut morbus urget*), or “a fit of frenzy” (*fanaticus error*), and “the wrath of Diana” (*iracunda Diana*) or a kind of lunacy; all these were recognized signs of “the madness of the poet” (*vesanus poeta*). Likewise, Ovid (43 BCE–ca. 17 CE) frequently testifies that the poet is “inspired” by the deity (*Fasti*, VI, 5; *Ex Ponto*, III, 4, 93 and IV, 2,

¹ For what immediately follows, including all the Latin citations following (but with my translations), see Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, 474–75, Excursus VIII, “The Poet’s Divine Frenzy.”

25). The vulgar conception of "enthusiasm," literally god-possession, similarly regarded the poet as insane, and this condition was defined by Statius (ca. 40–96) with the adjective *entheus*, meaning "inhabited or possessed by a god" (*Silvae*, I, 4, 25, and I, 5, 1). Hence, Pliny the Younger (62–113) proposed that, apparently universally, "It is conceded that poets are maddened"—"*Poetis furere concessum est*" (*Epistolae*, VII, 4, 10).

The Middle Ages would also find that the familiar condition of "divine or poetic madness"—*furor divinus sive poeticus*—could be also produced by Phoebus, or Apollo (an idea that was repeated in the Renaissance, as will be shown in Chapter 5). Around 400, Claudian had begun his epic *Proserpine* (I, 4) with this observation: "Stepping back to the pagans, the madness of humans is now sensed in our own hearts; it is all driven into us by Apollo breathing into our breasts"—"*Gressus removete profani / Iam furor humanos nostro de pectore sensus / Expulit et totum spirant praecordia Phoebum*." Clearly, Latin readers during the Middle Ages knew of the "maddened" poet's divine frenzy, and without having directly to know Plato's Greek text. In short, the topos had become thoroughly Latinized. Among others, the stinging "frenzy-inspiration" (*oestrum*, also meaning "gad-fly" or "horse-fly") of the Muses was transmitted by Statius as a "gad-fly-bit poetic inspiration"—"*pierium oestrum*," playing on *Pierius*, as "muse," or just "poetic." Later, Nemesianus referred (ca. 280) to the "muse-driven frenzy"—"*aonium oestrum*," so making a convoluted geographical reference to *Aonia*, a part of Boethia, hence to the traditional "abode of the Muses." Later, Fulgentius (ca. 480–550) offered the more direct, or less recondite, comparison between "the insane person and the delirium of the prophet" (*ut insanus vates delirabam*) and "the poet's madness" (*poeta furens*).

Isidore of Sevilla (ca. 560–636), the Pliny of the Middle Ages, somewhat oddly derives (*Etymologiae* I, 39, 4) "song" (*carmen*) from "mindlessness" (*carere mente*). This forced bit of etymology was echoed in the Carolingian period by Modoin of Autun (d. 843), who then observed how "Some people have affirmed the insanity of the poets, and they state that their songs arise from their state of mindlessness"—"*Nonnulli adfirmant etiam insanire poetas, / Carmina dum statuunt mente carere sua*." A bit later, in the Hohenstaufen period, an anonymous author adopted the topos in the preface to his poem called the *Ligurinus*:

*Certa quidem vatis dementia, carmen agreste
De tanto cicinisse viro: sed parce furori,
Princeps magne, pio; ne te praesumptio nostra
Exagilet: solis licet insanire poetis.*

(Certainly, whoever prophesizes dementedly makes a boorish song, one poisoned with too many rhetorical ornaments. He is but moderately mad, o great and devout ruler. I do not presume to disturb you because this is only the license for the poets to go mad.)

In a twelfth-century poetic anthology, now known as the *Carmina Burana* (in “The Archpoet’s Confession,” verse 19), the equally Bacchic and Apollonian sources of poetic madness were made explicit:

*Michi numquam spiritus poetrie datur
Nisi prius fuerit venter bene satur;
Dum in arce cerebri Bacchus dominator,
In me Phoebus irruit et miranda fatur.*

(Never did the spirit stir my poesies
If my belly had not first been filled;
Not before Lord Bacchus reigns over my endeavor
Can Apollo inspire into me something clever.)

As we have seen, and beginning with Plato, the theory of “poetic madness” has generally been based on the momentous idea of numinous inspiration. This is a concept which perennially reappears, and it represents, as it were, an esoteric, for being “divine,” explanation of the origin of poetry. It resurfaced, for example, in the Florentine Platonism of the late Quattrocento (as will be shown in Chapter 5). To cite but one example, on the walls of the Vatican *stanze* designed by Raphael in 1510, a painted medallion placed on the vault of the Camera della Segnatura represents Poetry, with this allegorical figure bearing the explicit inscription “*Numine afflatur*”—“Inspired by the [Poetic] Spirit.” According to Curtius’s final conclusion,

If we now look back at the Middle Ages, we can see that the theory of “poetic madness”—the Platonic interpretation of the doctrine of *inspiration* and *enthusiasm*—lived on through the entire millennium which extends from the conquest of Rome by the Goths to the conquest of Constantinople by the Turks. “Lived on” is perhaps too pretentious an expression. As it did with so many other coinages of the Greek spirit, the Middle Ages took this one [“poetic madness”] from late Rome, preserved it, and copied it to the letter, until the creative Eros of the Italian Renaissance reawakened the spirit in the letter. That the poetic *manía* found a refuge in the medieval *scriptoria*, along with the

rest of the authoritative stock of antique learning, is a paradox when one considers that it was precisely in the Middle Ages that writing poetry was considered to be sweat-producing labor and was recommended as such. But the juxtaposition of these unconcealed contradictions is what gives medieval culture its attraction.²

But the vulgar form of the enduring concept—holding that to write poetry means to be “mad”—was still to be preserved in one of Italy’s modern classics. In *I Promessi Sposi* (1825), with subtle humor Alessandro Manzoni observed that

Among the common people in Milan, and even more so in the countryside, the term “poet” no longer signifies—as the educated classes still argue—a sacred intellect, one inhabiting Pindar or working as an ally of the Muses; instead, they just call his a bizarre brain, and they say that he’s a bit mad, and assert that in both his discourses and in his deeds he reveals more wittiness and singularity than reason.³

In a complementary sense, and according to what we have seen to be a persistent theory of “Inspiration,” either Plato’s or Breton’s, neither skill nor reason is adequate for the genesis of genuine poetry (“Art”). In order to instigate the divinely induced fit deemed necessary to initiate the praiseworthy creative act, the artist must become *passive*, dependent upon *inspiration* descending from a higher, external source. Therefore, what we might now (in a post-Surrealist age) choose to call the “automatic” fashioning of such inspired productions is a given, indeed the necessary, pre-condition of the act of true poetic, “artistic” creation. It is also the obligatory pre-condition for a literally “supernatural” kind of *inspired*, specifically *prophetic*, expression—*vatication*—and as done by the *vates*. It was as such—that is, as prophetic expressionism—that significant literary creation was pictured by many early medieval artists. Given their cultural context, and just as you would expect, they, however, solely applied their visualization of the poetic experience to the God-*inspired* authors of the Christian Gospels. All of these writers of the divinely authored Scriptures were granted the title of “prophets.”

² Ibid., 475.

³ Manzoni, as in *ibid.*: “Presso il volgo di Milano, e del contado ancora più, poeta non significa già, come per tutti i galantuomini, un sacro ingegno, un abitator di Pindo, un allievo delle Muse; vuol dire un cervello bizzarro e un po’ balzano, che, ne’ discorsi e ne’ fatti, abbia piu dell’ arguto e del singolare che del ragionevole.”

In his *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas seems to echo Plato's *Phaedrus* (as quoted in Chapter 3). Here, in speaking of the human experience of "revelation" and "inspiration," Thomas actually uses the terms *prophetia* and *raptus*. With its connotations of coercion and externally applied force, this second word—*raptus*, or "transport"—approaches Plato's terminology: *theia mania*, a "god-induced frenzy," or divine madness. As defined by Aquinas, such rapture is "being raised up by a higher power, and away from what is proper to nature, and toward what is contrary to nature—in *id quod est contra naturam*." But *prophetia* is understood here as an intense emotional event, a *passio*, one experienced wholly *within* the mind of the one who is uniquely granted revelation and inspiration. Aquinas then wonders whether the gift for "prophecy" is something held by the designated "prophet" as a *habitus*, that is, as a property, a gift or an ability. His response is that the light of prophecy, in effect a mental illumination, is present in the soul of the prophet in the manner of his suffering, what he calls a "fleeting scratch." He concluded that the cognition of the sleeper is more powerfully receptive than is that of the wakened person. As he added,

In prophetic revelation the spirit of the prophet is stirred by the Holy Spirit like a failing tool. . . . To be sure, prophecy, insofar as it is seeing on the prophet's part, is in some sense a spiritual act; but in regard to the light that suddenly is received, and which is like something passing through (like sunlight in the atmosphere), it resembles suffering.⁴

An eloquent case in point is the wholly visual depiction of a mightily inspired, also prophetic, "St. Mark" that was painted in Reims (France) by an unnamed Carolingian illustrator around the year 830, and then bound into the *Gospel Book of Ebbo*. (**fig. 11**) This is a violently "expressionistic" rendering of an inspired Christian saint passively receiving, and then excitedly transcribing, the *Verbum Dei* as it is being "dictated" to him by a lion. (Although such a notoriously ferocious feline might seem an unlikely Muse, we recall that Mark's animal symbol was a winged lion, as derived from Ezekiel 1:5–14, and reiterated in Revelation-*Apocalypsis* 4:6–8.) The very fact of the *Ebbo Gospel's* precocious painterly "expressionism" makes it resemble a typically frenzied self-portrait executed in 1889 by the typically inspired

⁴ Aquinas, as in Pieper, *Enthusiasm and Divine Madness*, 57–58.

Vincent van Gogh (1853–90), but only such as that *moderne Expressionismus* might have been conceived well over a thousand years later, during the Symbolist period (and as discussed in Chapter 8). (**Fig. 12**) Viewed in another way, the four author-portraits inserted into the *Ebbo Gospels* seem like unintentional text-book illustrations for Paul Fechter's thesis, as published in 1914 (and as already discussed in Chapter 1). As was then stated by Fechter, modern German *Expressionismus* was indeed spiritual, was emphatically emotional and, especially, it was deemed a distinctly "Nordic" kind of *Ausdrucks wollen*.⁵

What we see portrayed here (in **fig. 11**) is something like a graphic *topos*, a pictorial commonplace. In effect, the turning head and upward glance belonging to the ecstatic gospel writer portrayed by the unnamed Carolingian artist belong to the standard pictorial vocabulary of "divine inspiration." The formula seems to have first been made conventional in illuminated manuscripts depicting the "Evangelists" (literally meaning "messengers"); twisting their necks and suddenly turning their heads to hearken to the dictated word, these worthies are typically accompanied by inspiring angels. The combination of an awkwardly twisted body with the up-turned vision then serves as an outward sign of a wholly interior experience, namely, the divine "*possession*" of the writer (see also the "possessed" figures in **figs. 4, 8, 9, 10**). As was only logical, the Renaissance later appropriated this now-standard, corporeal sign of "inspiration." Among many other artists, Michelangelo employed the standard pose, most notably in his figures of the Prophets and Sibyls exhibited in the Sistine Chapel, where their agitated responses to their accompanying *genii* enact the effects upon them worked by their privileged insights deriving from "divine revelation." In a strictly secular context, in his *Portrait of Tommaso Inghirami* (1514/15), Raphael, for instance, depicts the writer with his pen hovering above a manuscript page while he turns his head and calmly looks upward in order to listen to the dictation coming down to him from his unseen "Poetic Muse."⁶

In the broader viewpoint, however, here (as shown in **fig. 11**) we additionally discern the "maddened poet" common to the popular

⁵ Regarding that desirable "malerische Ausdruck der Persönlichkeit" birthing all those inspired "Ausdrucksformen," again see Fechter, *Der Expressionismus*, 25 ff.

⁶ For the Renaissance appropriation of the standard auctorial commonplace, a pictorial with conventional pose signifying "inspiration," see (among others) Ruvoldt, "Michelangelo's Dream," esp. p. 88.

imagination. In his treatise *On the Sublime* (*Peri Hypsous*, ca. AD 50), the otherwise unknown author now called “Longinus” recognized that the effect operating upon an audience by creative literature is not “persuasion,” which is what the teachers of Rhetoric would have wished. Instead, Longinus insisted that the desired end is “transport”—*ekstasis*. In this emotional response, the action of the “Sublime” (*Hypsous*) is roused, he says, by “inspired and vehement passion” (*sphodron kai entusiastikon pathos*).⁷ The treatise attributed to Longinus was recovered during the Renaissance, and was then made widely available in a dual-language edition, Greek-Latin, as published in Basel by Francesco Robortello in 1554. This treatise became thereafter authoritative for all Renaissance, even future Neo-Classical and Romantic, discussions about the ever-mysterious wellsprings of “sublime” creativity. As generations of Europeans were now enabled to read, “Genius, so they say, is innate; it is not something that can be learnt, and nature is the only art that begets it.” So “naturally” endowed, the Poet’s next goal becomes “a noble emotion,” and this aspiration is obtained, so states Longinus, “when it forces its way to the surface in a gust of frenzy, and a kind of *divine inspiration* is breathed into the speaker’s words.”

The result of such “divine inspiration” is obviously very much like the intentions propelling the art of the painter, that is, what Longinus calls “the representation of mental pictures.” The desired effect is additionally very much like the *Ausdrucksformen* of the German Expressionists. Just as Paul Fechter would state in 1914, Longinus had described long before how, “carried away by your feelings, you imagine that you are actually seeing the subject of your description [*ekphrasis*], and you enable your audience as well to see it.” The successful artist is the one who has “almost compelled his audience, too, to see what he had imagined.” As a model example, Longinus actually cites “the appearance of Dionysus, described in unusual terms as being divinely possessed [and] inspired with a Bacchic frenzy.”⁸ Granted the enduring significance of Longinus for so much future aesthetic evaluation, the specific significance of this late-Hellenistic author’s observations are recognized by William Wimsatt to be: “a celebration of ecstasy and inspiration . . . the special and pulsing accent

⁷ Longinus, as in Wimsatt, *Literary Criticism*, 99.

⁸ Longinus, as in *Classical Literary Criticism*, ed. Dorsh, 101, 109, 121, 123.

of Longinus is on the great and impassioned soul of the poet, his flashes and spurts of inspiration, the careless and plunging grandeur of his utterance, and the corresponding transport of his audience."⁹

Among many others, Shakespeare certainly knew of this possessed ("enthusiastic") creative spirit, the kind equipped with "seething brains," with those "shaping fantasies." The Saint Mark shown in the *Gospel Book of Ebbo* (**fig. 11**) is a "writer," and specifically his is the "poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling"; as such, his "glance [flits] from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven." And Shakespeare illustrates just how conventional this visual configuration of compulsive authorial activity had actually become; for instance, as one reads in a *Midsummer Night's Dream* (V, I, i),

The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

Fechter aside (Shakespeare too), art historians routinely recognize the strictly formal sources of such early medieval "Evangelist Portraits" as having themselves been derived from much earlier classical art, particularly from the conventionalized formats of frontispieces with portraits showing the pagan authors of prestigious philosophical treatises.¹⁰ But our illustration from the *Ebbo Gospels* (**fig. 11**) represents a nearly unique approximation to classical *content*, and à la Plato in this specific instance, and in the very particular sense of the emotional state which was so often attributed to classical *inspiratio*. However, so moved by the *content* of his subject matter, that is, by the understood *emotional* significance impelling his *Ausdrucksformen*, the anonymous Carolingian artist has radically altered the traditional visual *form* of classical-era "author portraits."

A useful description of the pertinent visual particulars of this particularly "inspired," and thus "expressionistic" (*avant la lettre*), portrait is provided by James Snyder:

⁹ Wimsatt, *Literary Criticism*, 725. For more on Longinus's methodology and later influence, see Clark, *Theory of Inspiration*, 66–67, 71, 88, 128–30.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Friend, "The Portraits of the Evangelists in Greek and Latin Manuscripts."

This is no simple author portrait; it is a type known as the “inspired Evangelist.” Mark responds dramatically to the vision of the lion as if experiencing a mystical revelation. This heightened animation conveying the psychological state of excitement is new [in medieval art], but it is an [*ausdrucksvoll*] idea that soon passed into the repertory of the Northern artists [and later culminating in van Gogh: as in **fig. 12!**]. And how is this excitement so vividly expressed? Notable are the distortions of the facial features—the heavily arched eyebrows, the large staring eyes, the pointed lashes—and the nervous twitch in the fingers and torso [again as in **fig. 12!**]. Even more expressive are the racing lines that replace the modeling in color found in the [Carolingian] Palace School portraits.

To be sure, the arms and legs are highlighted and darkened illusionistically, but the opaque qualities of the paint are dissolved and energized by swirling lines, like whirlpools spinning about the arms and legs. Gold flecks in the hair electrify Saint Mark’s features, and the illusionistic landscape background is transformed into a surging waterfall of cascading lines. A new style is in the making before our eyes, a style that can be more appropriately termed “expressionistic,” and no wonder that some scholars have seen the Reims School as the fountainhead of dynamic linearism of later Romanesque [and even modern or “expressionistic”] art.¹¹

What we have just read is a modern description (an *ekphrasis*!) rendered by a scholarly art historian in order to articulate the distinctive stylistic traits pertaining to a precociously modern “look” presented by a particular medieval image (**fig. 11**). Even though this is useful to us as external information, let us now find out just what such an inspired medieval author might have to say about the *inner* psychological state belonging to the kind of prophetic vision depicted in the *Ebbo Gospel*—and just as the visionary *auctor* might himself have

¹¹ Snyder, *Medieval Art* (1989), 208, 217; for much more on the “inspired” Evangelist portraits, see Nordenfalk, “Der Inspirierte Evangelist”; Nordenfalk, and Kahsnitz, “Matheus ex ore Christi scripsit: Zum Bild der Berufung und Inspiration der Evangelisten”; Weisbach, “Die Darstellung der Inspiration auf mittelalterlichen Evangelistenbildern”; for the antique iconographic precedents, see Schefold, *Die Bildnisse des antiken Dichters, Redner und Denker*; for a Renaissance reformulation, see Ruvoldt, “Michelangelo’s Dream”; for a notable early Baroque example, see Lavin, “Divine Inspiration in Caravaggio’s Two St. Matthews”; idem, “Addenda to ‘Divine Inspiration’”; idem, “A Further Note on the Ancestry of Caravaggio’s First Saint Matthew”; for an 18th-century version, see Gaus, “Ingenium und Ars: Das Ehepaar-bildnis Lavoisier von David und die Ikonographie der Museninspiration”; for many other examples, see Stoichita, *Visionary Experience*. These Christian adaptations of the *topos* of creative “Inspiration” all implicitly derive from the pagan-classical precedents set by the Bacchic precedent.

experienced it. Alas, the actual Gospel writers are vague on their sources of literary inspiration.

St. John is by far the most explicit about "the Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God . . . sent and signified by his angel unto his servant John." As is recorded in the first chapter of the Book of Revelations (*Apocalypsis*), "I John . . . was in the isle that is called Patmos [and I was] in the Spirit on the Lord's day [Vulgate: *fui in spiritu in dominica die*], and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet . . . and when I saw him [the angel], I fell at at his feet as dead. And he . . . said unto me . . . write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter." Whereas the classical author was *inspired* ("breathed into") by a Muse, in this case the Christian author, typically an "Evangelist," resorts to an "angel" (Latin, *angelus*, from the Greek, ἄγγελος, a messenger from God).

Although he did not directly say so, John must have recognized himself to have been "inspired." For instance, in the Vulgate the noun *inspiratio* literally appears as the breath of a divine spirit, that is, "the inspiration of the Almighty," with this providing useful intelligence to mankind (Job 32:8: "*spiritus est in hominibus, et inspiratio Omnipotentis dat intelligentiam*"). Another Old Testament citation explicitly states that when "the spirit" of God "comes mightily upon you," then you will become a "prophet"; as such, suddenly "you are turned into another man" (1 Samuel 10:6: "*Et insiliet in te Spiritus Domini, et prophetabis cum eis, et mutaberis in virum alium*"). Hence, the St. Mark pictured in the *Ebbo Gospel* is specifically cast in the role of a "prophet." In the New Testament we are further informed that, in fact, loquacious "prophecy" itself arises from the literal "*inspiration*" of the Holy Spirit" into mere mortals (2 Peter 1:21: "*prophetia [est] Spiritu sancto inspirati, locuti sunt sancti Dei homines*"). Moreover, "All scripture is divinely inspired" (2 Timothy 3:16: "*Omnis Scriptura divinitus inspirata est*").

Fortunately, the early Church Fathers give us a few more details about their ecstatic experiences in the presence of otherworldly divinity. Besides frequent references to physical effects of "light" and "illumination," phenomena literally expressive of desirable metaphorical conditions of "enlightenment," there is also mention made of manifestations of an electric kind of "divine energy," of the sort so vividly depicted in the *Ebbo Gospel* picture (**fig. 11**). A case in point is St. Gregory Palamas: "He who participates in the divine energy, himself becomes to some extent light. He is united to the light, and by that light he sees in full awareness all that remains hidden [*occulta*]

to those who have not this grace [or privileged perception]. Thus he transcends not only the bodily senses, but also all that can be known by the intellect.”¹² Writing about the same time, yet another Christian visionary makes explicit the functional linkages to certain experiences, and even to a distinctive terminology of a kind obviously derived from the earlier Dionysiac Mysteries, namely “ecstasy” and “divine intoxication.” According to St. Gregory of Sinai,

Wonder is the total lifting of the powers of the soul towards what may be discerned of the entire majesty of Glory. Or again wonder is a pure and entire outreaching of the mind towards the limitless power of light. But ecstasy is more than the taking up of the powers of the soul to the heavenly places, but it also involves their removal from all the actions of the senses; for love [of the divine] is the intoxicating drink of the spirit’s desire. . . . Ecstatic love of the spirit is a divine intoxicant that overpowers our natural wits. Through this, our awareness of the forms of things is taken from us.¹³

Including such distinctive terminology as “ecstasy,” with this requiring “removal from all the actions of the senses,” so producing the desired “intoxicating” effect, Gregory’s explanation is little more than a recapitulation of Plato’s phraseology; the only distinction is the new context, “Christian” as opposed to “pagan.”

In the standard Christian context (**fig. 11**), just as was the case previously in the authoritative Platonic explanation, Inspiration was commonly understood to manifest itself as “dictation,” that is, as a recitation from God, that which is passively received by His designated spokesperson. In the case of the latter, Moses, for example (as in Exodus 3:1–7; I Kings 8:9, 53, 56), then passes on the divine instructions to the people, so additionally becoming their divinely appointed leader. In fact, many of the Church Fathers actually did use the term “dictate” to explain Inspiration. This meaning remained standard. Centuries later, in 1893, Pope Leo XIII issued an encycli-

¹² Gregory of Palamos, as in Happold, *Mysticism*, 223.

¹³ Gregory of Sinai, as in *ibid.*, 223. Needless to say, many more citations to this effect may be found here, for instance, Richard of St. Victor: “. . . the mind of man is ravished into the abyss of divine light so that the soul, having forgotten all outward things, is altogether unaware of itself . . . the soul is abstracted from itself, ravished into that secret place of divine refuge . . . wholly dissolved into itself . . . begins to hear words that it is not lawful for man to utter and to understand the strange and hidden things of God. In this state, the soul is altogether melted into him,” etc. (*ibid.*, 245). For some broader analyses of this perennial condition, see Eliade, *Le Chamanisme*; Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*; Oesterreich, *Possession, Demonic and Other*.

cal *Providemissimus Deus* in which he declared in a forthright manner that "God so moved the inspired writers by His supernatural operation that He incited them to write, and assisted them in their writing, so that they correctly conceived, accurately wrote down, and truthfully expressed all that He intended—and only what He intended; and only thus can God be the author of the Bible." Therefore, according to official Church doctrine, through *Inspiration* God becomes the author of the Bible, and in such a way the Bible is *His* word(s). Hence, the ecstatic St. Mark pictured in the *Ebbo Gospels* (fig. 11) is merely His "inspired," hence wholly involuntary, earthling amanuensis.¹⁴

These literally "ecstatic" notions became fundamental to the Western religious tradition, a wholly conventional belief-system which also holds that God necessarily resides in the sky, *in coelo* (also called "Heaven") and, presently, nearly everyone in the West has learned by rote a standard recitation, beginning, "Our Father who art in Heaven . . ." Accordingly, the enraptured, ecstatic and intoxicated St. Mark of the *Ebbo Gospel* lifts, and just as he must, his radiant eyes upwards, toward the sky. A further context for the pointedly upward glance for the source of his "inspiration" is the Holy Spirit's *descent* from the sky following Jesus's baptism in the River Jordan, an aquatic event followed a bit later by His privileged return—His *ascent*—to Heaven after leaving His disciples behind, slumbering and earth-bound, just as was described in the Book of Acts.

This heavenly reference point was, however, nothing new either; Christians had merely borrowed the luminescent ascensional motif from pagan Hellenistic, also later Roman, rulers. When one of these pagan worthies left his mortal coil behind, he, typically employed as an "Emperor" was then said to experience "*apotheosis*," literally an "ascent as a god." Surviving examples of antique portraiture depicting royal figures in heaven-bound *apotheosis*, and as typically characterized by the "heavenward-gazing eyes," are numerous. Beginning with Alexander the Great, the pose also bespoke *enthusiasmos*, the "heavenly passion," a state of "possession," *ekstasis*, with wet, teary eyes and an open, breathing mouth: "*elevatis ad coelum oculis, compunctus corde, commotus in lacrymis*," according to an imperial chronicler. The very look—*elevatis ad coelum oculis*—told us that the privileged experiencer-amanuensis

¹⁴ Leo XIII, as in McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 390 (s.v., "Inspiration," pp. 389–93).

with his “eyes elevated toward heaven” was one thrilled by otherworldly visions, the kind experienced in religious “ecstasy” and “transport.”

The radiant faces of such superior personages, Christ too, were expressly said to be illuminated by the “light of the spirit”—*charis* (καρίς or “gift”)—were made phosphorescent with inner spiritual life, and the stunning effect upon the believers was literally “charismatic.” So appearing, it was understood that they often flew up to, and then merged into, the Sun, *Helios*. As H. P. L’Orange remarks, “big prominent, glistening eyes betokened, according to the physiognomical lore of the ancients, superhuman, soaring aspiration. Scipio’s eyes shone [likewise] in his awe-inspiring countenance: *flagrant lumina niti adspectu, gratusque inerat visentibus horror [cum] imperatorius ardor oculorum.*”¹⁵ There you have it, the evidence showing that the plentiful medieval (**fig. 11**), and later Baroque (for instance, **fig. 10**), portraiture of saints “in ecstasy” was actually modeled on iconographic formulas initially invented for the representation of *charismatic* Hellenistic rulers.

So noted, we may examine another case of dream-derived medieval *écriture automatique*. Writing in 524, and while awaiting execution in a vile prison near Milan, Boethius mentioned how he was only enabled to compose his *Consolation of Philosophy* once he was able to banish from his sight “the Muses of Poetry,” those pagan, “maimed Muses who guide my pen.” It was those dreadfully *inspiring* ladies who, he states, “stifle the fruit-bearing harvest of reason with the barren briars of the passions: they free not the minds of men from disease, but accustom them thereto.” However, the towering allegorical figure of “Philosophia” opportunely comes to his aid, commanding the maiming Muses, “Away with you, Sirens, seductive unto destruction!” So chastened, states Boethius, “their band thus berated cast a saddened glance upon the ground, and confessing their shame in blushes, passed forth dismally over the threshold.”¹⁶ Nonetheless, the medieval writer who knew best how to portray the palsied, hence ecstatic, author-portrait of the St. Mark placed in the *Ebbo Gospel* (**fig. 11**) was Dante, who spoke of the kind of inspired writer who “has the habit of [creating] art and, hence, has the hand which trembles”—“*c’ha l’habito de l’arte e man che trema.*”¹⁷

¹⁵ See L’Orange, *Apotheosis in Ancient Portraiture*, 16, 23, 44, 96, 110.

¹⁶ Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, 3–5.

¹⁷ Dante, as in Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, 45 (my translation however).

Unfortunately, no written instructions seem to have survived from the Carolingian era of the sort that might have guided the anonymous artist who composed our *Ebbo Gospel* picture (fig. 11). Very specific indications along such lines may, however, be found in guide-books composed much later for the benefit of artists who commonly had to compose pictures suitable for meditational purposes. One such was published by the Spanish writer-artist Vicente Carducho. According to an explanation of the proper way of picturing "Devotion," as given in his *Diálogos de la Pintura* (1633), this orthodox kind of religious ecstasy signifies extreme emotionality, and so it requires an equally extreme vocabulary of tortured postures conventionally indicating religious *inspiration*. These evidently painful, but properly "inspired," poses were commonly recognized to include:

kneeling, [with] clasped hands thrown up to Heaven or level with the chest, head raised, eyes gazing upwards, either bathed in tears or gay, or else with the head bowed down and the eyes closed [and with] the neck always twisted, or with hands having interlaced fingers, [with the body] sometimes prostrate on the ground, or leaning so far forwards that the face almost touches the ground, with hunched shoulders and other actions, all depending upon the emotions of the devout person—who might be either praying, submissive, sad, happy, or in awe; in devotion there is room for all of these.¹⁸

Earlier, in a work known to Carducho, Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo's *Trattato dell'Arte* (1587), it was explained how the historical "prophets and saints had several different ways" of expressing religious ecstasy and inspiration. For instance, "Abraham threw himself to his knees, with his face to the ground; Ezekiel prayed to God with his face against the wall; Elias placed his head between his knees." Also admitted to the canon of inspired postures were other ecstatic gestures, including somewhat complicated maneuver of having "the face raised to heaven with both arms opened wide or crossed, or else beating upon the breast, hands thrown up to heaven, one knee on the ground, the face inclined and the fingers interlaced next to the chin, arms open wide and head inclined, prostrate upon the ground with head down," and so forth.¹⁹

¹⁸ Carducho, *Diálogos de la Pintura*, 404–5, "Devoción."

¹⁹ Lomazzo, *Scritti sulle arti*, 118. For more details on such contemporary pictorial posturings, see Weise and Otto, *Die religiösen Ausdrucksgebärden des Barock*; for the antique precedents, see Jucker-Scherrer, *Der Gestus des Aposkopiens*.

It seems that, long ago, it was sometimes recognized there were those who “falsely” entered into the ecstatic visionary experience. According to a description provided by an anonymous mystical writer in his treatise on *The Cloud of Unknowing* (ca. 1350),

Many amazing practices are found among those who are deceived into doing this false [visionary] work. . . . Some of them draw their eyes up into their heads, as though they were stupid sheep, beaten over the head and about to die at any moment. Some hold their heads on one side, as though they had a worm in their ears. . . . When they read, or hear other persons read or say that men should “lift up their hearts to God,” they immediately begin to stare at the stars as though they were [flying] above the moon, and they listen as though to hear angels singing in heaven. Sometimes, in the fantasy of their imaginations, these men [think they can] pierce the planets and make a hole in the firmament through which to look.²⁰

The problem of the inauthentic, or feigned, “vision” was recognized even earlier by Maimonides (Moses ben Maimon, 1135–1204). In his *Guide for the Perplexed*, which was written in Córdoba in Arabic, he got to the root of the syndrome:

Some persons [claim to] perceive scenes, dreams, and confused images when awake in the form of a prophetic vision. They then believe that they are [inspired] prophets. They are amazed that they can perceive visions, and so they think that they have acquired wisdom without training. They fall [however] into grave errors as regards important philosophical principles, and they see [only] a strange mixture of true and imaginary things. All this is the consequence of the strength of their imaginative faculty, and [it only shows] the weakness of their logical faculty, which has not developed, for it has not passed from potentiality into actuality.²¹

Evidently, certain critics were sensitive to the difference between genuine and inauthentic “inspiration,” and as early as the twelfth or thirteenth century. Nonetheless, the problem is still very much with us . . .

The Complementary Conditions of “Inspiration” and “Hysteria”

Notions change with history, especially those regarding what Society considers desirable (versus undesirable) states of mind. An early critic

²⁰ Anonymous, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 184, 195.

²¹ Maimonides, as in Bundy, *Theory of the Imagination*, 215.

was the anonymous English mystic author just quoted—but his criticism of the “false” visionary experience, or *ersatz* “inspiration,” is not like a description that might be applied at the present time. Today, for instance, the preceding descriptions of ecstatic visionary experiences and poetic possession, whether medieval or (even) classical in origin, would most likely simply be labelled “Hysteria” by a modern scientist, a psychologist. As we have seen (in Chapter 3), according to Dr. D. H. Rawcliffe, the components of “pathological *hysteria*” include the diverse, but generally picturesque effects of, among many other phenomena commonly associated with creative *inspiration*, “*automatic writing, involuntary speaking* (‘*inspiration*’),” likewise “visual hallucinations or ‘visions,’ *auditory hallucination—including the hearing of* ‘voices,’” also “automatic writing,” which was itself later famously to become a Surrealist “artistic” technique.²²

Such was the opinion rendered in 1952 by a modern scientist, a clinical psychologist, regarding these kind of otherworldly visionary experiences. Nonetheless, we have also read how the “Ancients” (*archaios, palaios, antiquus, vetus, priscus*), even though employing other terminology, had long before described the *inspired* and *ecstatic*, creative condition. Now however, long after, we have a new, scientific and apparently even *quantifiable*, explanation for ecstatic *possession*, and either as applied to the religious experience or such as it now triggers praiseworthy creative energy. As we saw, the new explanation currently holds that such familiar states of religious *ecstasy* and creative *transport* are really due to a *chemical* imbalance, that is, of *endorphins*, those “natural opiates in the human brain.”²³

Even granted the new “endorphin-factor,” as much the frenzied attributes of the “St. Mark” portrayed in the *Ebbo Gospels* (fig. 11), as well as those reiterated traits characterizing visionary experiences written down by the early Church Fathers and later Saints (and as shown in figs. 9, 10), betray standard features pertaining to classical *inspiratio* or *enthousiasmos*. It was elsewhere implied by Plato (and much

²² Rawcliffe, *Psychology of the Occult*, 49, 60; emphasis mine; for a more sympathetic approach to “religious ecstasy,” see Eliade, *Le Chamanisme*. On the other hand, one might compare Rawcliffe’s “modern” clinical description with an “ancient” analogue, for instance, Iamblicus, as quoted here. Since, by the way, “hysteria” is so often gender-specific (or misogynist), I have taken pains only to cite the writings of *male* prophet-hysterics.

²³ Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion* (new ed.), 10, 34; see also Ahlberg, “Psycho-Physiological Aspects of Ecstasy”; Prince, *Shamans and Endorphins*.

earlier) that the utterances of the *poet-prophet* are essentially “automatic” in character, because, as a price for having access to truth, the poet-prophet must forego consciousness: “Every man, while he retains possession of that [his conscious reason], is powerless to compose a verse or chant an oracle” (nor, one supposes, to say a sooth). Therefore, Plato has Socrates exclaim that it is “not by art that they [poets] utter these things, but by divine influence” (*Ion* 534C).

Consequently, the inspired poet-oracle must submit to being rapt beyond his senses, and so he necessarily loses control of his personal identity, or rational being. Such is the conventional wisdom, the essential creation-myth, the kind made operative since the time of Plato. To carry the understood argument further, the poet-prophet-artist is actually little more than a mindless vehicle of divine infusion, a passive amanuensis obediently recording and transmitting the dictates of a supernatural will.²⁴ Times change, and so do the creation-myths generated by different historical cultures. Living now in a world amazed by the wonders wrought by modern scientific endeavor, as we would now claim, the poet-prophet-artist is simply a creature more plentifully endowed with *endorphins* than are the usual run of non-creative folk. If not due to “hysteria,” then over-the top creativity is simply a matter of chemical imbalance, not the work of the gods. *Chacun a son goût*.

The Complementary Conditions of “Inspiration” and “Dreams”

Formerly, there were different opinions. In classical literary theory, “imagination” was conceived as a power of visualization, whereby things physically absent appear “to the inner eye,” that is, as if they were actually present. The Greeks called such visualizations *phantasiai*, and the Romans referred to them as *visiones*. Such essentially pictorial mental imagery was closely connected with the power of the artist’s given medium to communicate emotion, and from an “inspired” creator to his properly enraptured audience. In his well-regarded treatise *On the Sublime* (*Peri Hypsous*), Longinus designated such intensely felt visualization as a gift indicative of true “sublimity” (*hypsos*), a term

²⁴ For the early history of the topos developed in Plato’s *Ion* (534 B–C), see Sperduti, “The Divine Nature of Poetry in Antiquity.”

cognate with "sleep" (*hypnos*), and so contextually suggesting by analogy an induced "hypnotic" state. Once more, among the fin-de-siècle Symbolists writers (as discussed in Chapters 8 and 9) the issue of "hypnosis" was again to become a popular topic, but in their case largely as due to the contemporary discovery of *l'automatisme psychologique* ("psychological automatism"), so making the ancient oneirocritical issue acquire timely and strictly modernist, pseudo-scientific traits.²⁵

An important scientific document of that time was the treatise published by Pierre Janet in 1889, *L'Automatisme psychologique: Essais de psychologie expérimentale sur les formes inférieures de l'activité humaine* ("Psychological Automatism: Essays on Experimental Psychology Dealing with the Lower Forms of Human Activity"). This was a pioneering work known to, among others, André Breton. This fin-de-siècle fascination with *l'inconscient* (the unconscious) also fitted in nicely with the notorious fascination with *les rêves* (dreams), so conspicuously displayed in Symbolist poetry and even Symbolist art-criticism. Long before André Breton was to make it into something like vanguard dogma by calling it *l'automatisme psychique* ("Psychic Automatism"), the concept of a passively operating "Unconscious Genius" propelling great art had become officially installed as a viable idea in art criticism published by the Symbolist theorists in France.

In this endeavor, they were particularly encouraged by published discussions about a recently invented (1891) contemporary science called "the New Psychology" (*la nouvelle psychologie*). By particularly dealing with the contemporaneously appealing subject of Dreams, another famed Symbolist-era writer and thinker, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), came up with the basis for orthodox-modernist psychiatry. All of this was announced in his pioneering treatise on *The Interpretation of Dreams* (*Die Traumdeutung*, 1900), another work later to be eagerly devoured by André Breton (among many, many others). At the beginning of his lengthy monograph, Freud laid out his daring thesis: "Every dream reveals itself as a psychical structure which has a meaning and which can be inserted at an assignable point in the mental activities of waking life."

In this, the first edition of a seminal study (to which much was later to be added), Freud notes that apparently some research in the

²⁵ For hypnotism as an important feature of the Symbolists' "nouvelle psychologie," see Silverman, *Art Nouveau*.

matter had already been done in Antiquity, namely, “in the two works of Aristotle which deal with dreams.” According to Freud, Aristotle had stated (in his *De divinatione per somnium*, and *De somniis*) that dreams “are ‘daemonic,’ since nature is ‘daemonic’ and not divine. Dreams, that is, do not arise from supernatural manifestations but follow the laws of the human spirit, though the latter, it is true [in classical terms], is akin to the divine.”²⁶ It was only in latter editions of *Die Traumdeutung*, appearing after 1914, that Freud was belatedly to acknowledge the work of yet another ancient author whose own oneirocritical investigations and conclusions paralleled his to an amazing degree. Freud’s acknowledgement of his antique predecessors also demonstrates that, like so much other *mythopoesia* to be analyzed here, the basic, and unquestionably influential, reverie-revelation premise underpinning Breton’s Surrealism is itself anything but modern.

Amazingly, a standard handbook of “dream-interpretation” (corresponding to Freud’s “*Traumdeutung*”) has actually survived. Dating in the second century AD, Artemidorus of Daldis’s *Oneirocriticon* (“dream-interpretation”) is now some eighteen centuries old. Doubtlessly many more such interpretive manuals once existed, but these have not come down to us due to the element of pure “chance” (*le hasard*) that operates both in human events and, most recently, in avant-garde art-making. According to our ancient source-book, “some dreams are theorematic, some allegorical. Theorematic are those whose fulfillment resembles the vision they offer.” As did Freud much later, Artemidorus had also observed that, “allegorical dreams signify something through something else; in these dreams the soul, according to certain laws, hints at something in the manner of a riddle.” Long before Freud installed the now-standard psychiatric topos of the dream-revealed, incestuous “Oedipus Complex,” the fateful “Oedipus Dream” was similarly analyzed in the *Oneirocriticon* (Book 1, ch. 79, “The Oedipus Dream”). Accordingly, Artemidorus is either the fellow who actually invented the motif or, more likely, he is merely an author who “documents” the existence of an already traditional trope in his uniquely surviving, “oneirocritical” treatise.

Even then, way back in the second century of the Christian era, Artemidorus was well aware of a tendency of psychiatrists (*bien avant la lettre*) and, more currently, of the followers of Jacques Lacan (*par*

²⁶ Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, 35–36 (Strachey’s edition usefully notes the inclusion of later materials, and the exact date of their entries).

exemple) to pursue the most oblique or arbitrary interpretation. For instance, the Hellenistic *Traumübersetzer* mentions a notorious school of "interpreters of dreams," the kind who, when they fancy they are "in love with a woman," will, rather than picture *her*, instead conjure up the image of "a horse or a mirror or a ship or the sea or a female animal or a feminine garment, or anything *else*, that [to them] signifies a woman . . ." His conclusion, as valid now as it was around AD 150, was that any truly professional and/or ethical, "interpreter of dreams must not give *his* opinion, or improvise a response concerning things he cannot fully comprehend. If he does so, he will lose his prestige, and it is the dreamer who will get hurt in the end."²⁷

Alas, Freud also largely failed to mention the fact of a substantial and highly influential, subsequent (post-Artemidorus) body of dream-literature. The convention mainly begins with Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*, which led directly to Macrobius's *In somnium Scipionis Commentarius*, and which also includes Boethius's *De consolazione Philosophiae*, all of which eventually gave birth to an extensive body of oneirocritical publications appearing during the Renaissance.²⁸ The principal source, however, for most post-classical clinical notions of the unconscious visionary condition was Macrobius. He laid particular stress on the dream as a "prophetic" instrument. Whereas he observed in his "Commentary on the Dream of Scipio" (ca. AD 405) how "many varieties of dreams were recorded by the ancients," he told future generations that:

All dreams may be classified under five main types: there is the enigmatic dream, in Greek *oneiros*, in Latin *somnium*; second, there is the prophetic vision, in Greek *horama*, in Latin *visio*; third, there is the oracular dream, in Greek *chrematismos*, in Latin *oraculum*; fourth, there is the nightmare, in Greek *enypnion*, in Latin *insomnium*; and last, there is the apparition, in Greek *phantasma*, which Cicero, when he has occasion to use the word,

²⁷ Artemidorus, as quoted in Luck, *Arcana Mundi*, 292–98; Luck's anthology includes several other vivid examples drawn from ancient oneirocritical literature.

²⁸ For the post-classical tradition of oneirocritical literature, including Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, among others, see Gandolfo, "Dolce Tempo" (see esp. 22–27, for the Renaissance-period bibliography); see also Browne, "Dreams and Picture-Writing"; Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*; Lynch, *The High Medieval Dream Vision*; Miller, *Dreams in Late Antiquity: Studies in the Imagination of a Culture*; Nordenfalk, C., and R. Kahsnitz, "Matheus ex ore Christi scripsit: Zum Bild der Berufung und Inspiration der Evangelisten"; Paravicini Bagliani, *Träume im Mittelalter: Ikonologische Studien*; Ruvaldt, "Michelangelo's Dream"; Zehnpfennig, "Traum" und "Vision" in *Darstellungen des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts*.

calls a *visum*. The last two, the nightmare and the apparition, are not worth interpreting since they have no prophetic significance. . . .

We call a dream oracular which clearly reveals what will or will not transpire, and what action to take or to avoid. We call a dream a prophetic vision if it actually comes true. . . . An enigmatic dream requires an interpretation for its understanding. . . . There are five varieties of it: personal, alien, social, public, and universal. . . . The Soul, when it is partially disengaged from bodily functions during sleep, at times gazes and at times peers intently at the truth, but with a dark obstructing veil interposed.²⁹

Once again, nothing new under the sun; no matter, never mind. Not disregarding his recognized art-historical contribution to the Surrealist ethos, the main reason for mentioning Freud's bibliographical lacunae is to point out how in modern psychiatry, just as in contemporary art history, apparently there is *nihil sub sole novum*.

The Case for "Possession" as a Cause of Inspired Creativity

Another key term, which one finds often repeated in the historical documents pertaining to the medieval era, is "possession."³⁰ Put simply, *possession*, and such as it has been routinely described by those societies which subscribe to the less sophisticated kinds of religious beliefs, is a condition in which a given individual's mind, body, or soul is explicitly understood to have been "taken over" by a supernatural being (see, for instance, **figs. 4, 9, 10, 11**). The operative adjective "supernatural" immediately tells us that we are also dealing with another manifestation of *dementia*, that is, "mindlessness." As I will argue, this medieval terminology also functionally conforms to the real, also meaning traditional and/or wholly conventionalized, character of most of those breathtaking accounts given by ancient writers to describe the ecstatic state of creative "inspiration."

Belief in *possession* is probably universal among human societies, no matter whether these are primitive or (nominally) civilized. One of the earliest accounts of possession is recorded in an ancient Greek tragedy, *The Bacchae*, by Euripides. This well-known drama provides another useful context for Michelangelo's *Bacchus* (**fig. 1**). As was told

²⁹ Macrobius, *Commentary*, 87–91.

³⁰ For what immediately follows, see Sargant, *The Mind Possessed: A Physiology of Possession, Mysticism, and Faith Healing*.

by Euripides, once devotees of the god Dionysus had gotten themselves properly *possessed*, they then pursued Pentheus, the impious king set up by the god of wine as a target for the rage of the Bacchantes. When the maddened Maenads eventually catch him, they tear him apart and eat him alive. However, in later versions, the god, or his stand-in, Orpheus, is the one who gets chased through the woods and devoured. Two words often associated with "possession" are derived from the Greek. Most common is "ecstasy" from *ex*, out of, and *histasthai*, to stand, but specifically meaning to "stand *outside* oneself." The alternative term is "enthusiasm," from *en*, in, and *theos*, god, and the result is the active verb *enthousiazzen*, to be inspired or *possessed* by a god. As we have repeatedly seen, both *ecstasy* and *enthusiasm* are synonymous symptoms characterizing the desirable condition labeled "inspiration."

As practiced today in so-called "primitive religion," *possession* is understood to be the result of special ritual invocations. In the course of primitive religious rites, the tribal religious leader—the shaman or witch doctor—will typically enter into a trance state and take on the attributes of a god. Sometimes this role falls either to a worshiper or to an initiate into the rite. In several recorded instances, participants in the Voodoo (or Santería) rite involuntarily fall into a trance; they are then said to be "possessed by a god." Even today in the highly developed countries of North America and Europe, some religious groups continue to believe in "possession" by the Christian "Holy Spirit," and some folks, particularly the Protestant kind who like to handle snakes, regularly practice "exorcism," with this designed to extract "evil spirits" from those designated to be "demonically possessed." Communist societies, although themselves now largely discredited and in a deep economic and ideological funk, may be the only societies in the postmodernist world where such primitive beliefs and practices are no longer acknowledged, let alone actively encouraged.

However, where such beliefs are actually encouraged, the properly "possessed" person usually speaks in a different voice, sometimes in a different and unintelligible language, and he or she will display a variety of spasmodic or graceful motions and other *outré* actions that would be nearly impossible for him to perform in the normal state (for instance, fire-walking, and the choreographic excesses of "dancing dervishes"). The worshipers usually believe that, during the possession, the god has come (down) to join the group in its religious celebration, and the possessed person often dons a mask or other

paraphernalia associated with the possessing deity. Frequently, the possessed true believer may also engage in aggressive or sexual acts that would not be permitted in the normal state. As a possessed postmodernist American might currently explain his or her aggressive or sexual acts, "It's not my fault; the Devil made me do it" (and this disclaimer also applies to the most practitioners of their "art made by chance").

In another variety of possession the possessed is actually to be taken ill. The illness may be either explained as harassment by a purely malevolent evil spirit or as a spiritual punishment for violating some sacred law. To the contrary, a modern psychiatrist might just call it a "psychosomatic" disorder. In the former case, a simple "exorcism" may cure the illness. In the case of a violation of taboo, a ritual cleansing of the sinner by a local witch doctor will usually also involve a confession by the possessed, or his proxy, and will probably include some sort of a gesture toward penance or the payment of a penalty. In Western religious belief, "demonic possession" is a condition in which an individual's mind, body, and soul are taken over by an evil spirit, a "demon," one that desires total control and, particularly in Christian belief, such "demonization" insures the eternal damnation of the possessed, often dubbed a "witch."

A common form of possession in the West during the last 150 years has been mediumistic possession. According to nineteenth-century occultist "Spiritist" (or Spiritualist) practice, the "medium" entered into a "trance state" fairly easily, and was then taken over by his or her "control," a hypothetical, disembodied spirit which used the medium to communicate from the spirit world. The control (or medium) is said to mediate between the spirits of the dead and their concerned relatives gathered in the medium's parlor. For instance, under the grandiose title of "Theosophy," this was basically the same kind of modernist Spiritism as was practiced by Madame Blavatsky. Sometimes, however, the spirits are allowed to speak for themselves, that is, directly through the medium. Moreover, the medium's voice and manner commonly change radically, as when the voice, accents, posture, and gestures attributed to the controlling spirit are reproduced in the possessed medium. This is the thespian-centered kind of occultism and, truly, "the medium is the message" (and vice versa).

The most common, or traditional, form of possession in Christendom is, however, "possession by the Holy Spirit," a manifestation of the real presence of the divinity. Common to several Pentecostal sects

of American Protestantism, and also to some experimental groups in the major Protestant denominations, and (even) in Roman Catholicism, possession by the Holy Spirit usually takes the forms of physical seizures, automatism and *glossolalia* (speaking in tongues), and also the interpretation of such unintelligible speech. That other form of possession, in which professed Christians largely figure, is the "demonic" sort, and that was most familiarly dramatized for us in "The Exorcist," a best-selling paperback book later made into a popular film (1973), with this blockbuster movie showing much morbid interest in the unusual phenomena associated with possession. Unlike divine possession, demonic possession need not be sought out, nor must it result from some moral transgression. It can just be the consequence of simple malevolent seduction by an evil spirit. This standard Christian situation, that is, demonic possession, is now called "abduction" by "aliens" (with these extraterrestrial *alieni* purportedly coming from Outer Space, and never Central America).³¹

Rather like the complementary phenomenon of "inspiration," the usual experience of "possession" seems to follow after a prolonged or intense period of extreme mental or physical stress. This stressed-out condition can be voluntarily induced by drumming, chanting, dancing, special breathing, exercises, drugs, physical exhaustion, or physical debilitation through exposure or fasting (with this often producing hypoglycemia). All of these practices of self-torment are eagerly embraced by the more rigorous minded acolytes of the New Age; narcissistic postmodernists most often perform these self-abusive rituals in cult-shrines called "health spas." Intense stress of this sort can result in the dissociation of the mind from the body and of sections of the mind from each other, so producing "schizophrenia" (literally meaning a "split brain"). In the case of shamans and mediums, traditional types rarely subscribing to the New Age commandments, the praiseworthy ability to enter into a trance state often and easily, so to become properly "possessed," is the first requirement for their job, for which there may be a preexisting dissociation in the personality of the medium or shaman. The trance can, in that case, be an easily adopted and, eventually, habitual alteration of consciousness may result. More recently, Joseph Beuys, a celebrated vanguard

³¹ This postmodernist populist myth is extensively explored, then meticulously "deconstructed," in Moffitt, *Picturing Extraterrestrials: Alien Images in Modern Mass Culture*.

German artist (see **fig. 25**), also wished to induce an alteration of consciousness in his enraptured audiences, and he even explicitly compared his evangelistic performances (called *Aktionen*) to the operations of a “shaman.”³² Whatever; the “ancients” would have just called Beuys “inspired.”

Amidst all this possessed “rapture,” what is now called for is a healthy measure of historical context. As it turns out, these kinds of “cultic acts” have been around a long time, in fact long before modernist “performance art.” In fact, their real context is pure occultism, specifically *magic*. In her well-documented study on the perennial *Myth of the Magus*, E. M. Butler cites various historical texts explicating the phenomenon, and such as it existed long before it was specifically called by Mircea Eliade the work of “shamans.” The verb used then, that is, by ancient Hellenes, was *mageyein*, meaning “to enchant, to bewitch, to charm.”³³ Like Joseph Beuys much later, such magicians usually saw themselves invested with a universal therapeutic mission: healing “possession.”

The old historical accounts (and these documents shall be reviewed and extensively quoted in Chapter 11) describe the therapeutic endeavors belonging to lay *magicians*, hence they are not properly certified to practice their occult medicine. For a truly efficacious cure, you must instead apply to a *priest*, and the only properly certified ones are those credentialed by the Roman Catholic Church. It is now essential to transcribe their tried and true procedure—*exorcism*—for this is the only one institutionally guaranteed to finally resolve the perennial problem of being “possessed.” This formula was explained in an anonymous Spanish manuscript composed around 1720, *Tratado de exorcismos, muy útil para los sacerdotes y Ministros de la Iglesia* (now found in the Library of the Hispanic Society of America.). As our sacerdotal authority explains,

The victim may be possessed by the Devil in two ways, namely: *per obsesionem*, and *per posesionem*. *Per obsesionem* is when the Devil is outside or around the person and then torments him with horrible faces, frightening shapes, and in other ways, as the exorcist will find out by experience. *Per posesionem* is when the Devil is inside the victim and *possesses*

³² For this point, and as it is fully documented, see Moffitt, *Occultism in Avant-Garde Art*.

³³ Butler, *Myth of the Magus*, 20.

him. Then he torments him with blows, pains of the body, etc. . . . Sometimes, when demons leave the bodies of the possessed, they are in the habit of showing themselves and appearing in the frightening shape of various animals and other terrible things, although they might not be seen by the bystanders. This is very simple, because these apparitions can be just imaginary, in order for the Devil to stir the blood and temper of the victim and to form some image which represents him. This vision—because [*nota bene*] it is imaginary—only appears to the one who inflicts the vision upon himself, as is inferred in the writings of the prophets. . . . The curious will be satisfied with this information, and the ignorant will be informed of the tricks the Devil has in order to fool us.³⁴

Well, that explanation is fairly clear, and also, obviously so, *exorcism* is the proven remedy. Quite simply, the possessed person has to make the following oath to a properly appointed and credentialed exorcist-priest; alas, it won't work with an uncredentialed, lay magician. Unfortunately, the following vow must also be pronounced in Latin—and since it simply won't work in modern English, you have no need of a translation. It goes exactly like this:

*Ego, N[omen], iuro, et promitto tibi sacerdoti, seu ministro Christo servare omnia illa, quae praeceperis mihi ex parte Dei, et Domini Jesu Christi pertinentia ad honorem eius, et liberationem huius creaturae, et quod si in ullo defecero ex his, quae tibi nunc promitto extunc invoco ipsum Deum Omnipotentem inatum contra me, qui tanquam ultor, et Iudex periurii mei mittat angelos suos, qui me expellant ex hoc corpore. Voco similiter Luciferum, quatenus cum omnibus furiis insurgat in me, et ducat [eis] in profundum Inferni. Amen.*³⁵

As we see from the actual historical records, it is a given that believers in *possession*, and especially the exorcists, have consistently maintained that a god or spirits take control of the mind and body. As we have repeatedly seen, such was also often said of "Inspiration." However, those who adhere to a strictly psychological or scientific explanation, and who thus reject the supernatural one, merely regard *possession* as "dissociation"; resulting from stress, *dissociation* is a form of hypnosis or auto-suggestion. Dr. William Sargant, a British physician who began to study dissociation during World War II, when he worked with battle-fatigued soldiers, found the phenomenon of "possession" to be similar to such commonplace psycho-physical crises

³⁴ Anonymous Spanish theologian, as in Brady, *A Manual of Exorcism*, 21, 36.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 58–59.

as deep mystical experience, conversion, brainwashing, the excitement of mobs, the reliving of emotional trauma under psychiatric treatment, even orgasm. In Sargant's view, extreme stress, beyond an individual's capacity to adopt to or bear it, causes the brain to enter into a state of protective inhibition. This condition, or "trance state," can, he says, be compared to a fuse blowing out and closing down part of an electrical system when it is overloaded. A portion of the brain is isolated, or the data contained there are wiped out, and the person then becomes open to suggestion from outside, or to impulses arising from the unconscious areas of the mind. Frequently, even in cases of known auto-suggestion, the "possessed" has displayed creative talents and abilities far exceeding his normal performance.³⁶ Another name for this transcendental psychic condition, "possession"—the kind uniquely allowing for the kind of privileged visions and profound insights commonly disallowed to the average citizen—is *Inspiration*.

The Installation of the "Christian Bacchus"

Our Renaissance sculpture (**fig. 1**) must in some way partake of the most significant of the lingering effects of the Middle Ages, namely its Christianity, which has also been shown here (**figs. 9–11**) in various ways to partake of ancient notions of "Inspiration." The issue of latent Christian symbolism in Michelangelo's *Bacchus* was raised, but only to be somewhat summarily dismissed, by Frederick Hartt. As he supposed, "there may just possibly be a hint of Christian content in the statue in that Christ, like Bacchus, was a god of wine (the Eucharist), and the mystery of drunkenness was considered comparable to that of death and, in representations of the 'Drunkenness of Noah,' was deliberately compared to the death of Christ."³⁷

Much more emphasis should, however, be put on the fact that—like Bacchus—Christ was commonly celebrated as a symbolic wine-

³⁶ See Sargant, *The Mind Possessed*.

³⁷ Hartt, *History of Italian Renaissance Art*, 464. For St. Jerome's fundamental contribution to the Noah-Bacchus conflation, but briefly mentioned by Hartt, see Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, 277. However briefly, only one author seems previously to have seen more than just "a hint of Christian content" in our sculpture; see Carman, "Michelangelo's 'Bacchus' and Divine Frenzy"; his short article does not, however, cite the influential medieval textual precedent (quoted here) established by Berchorius.

giver, and beginning with the Marriage at Cana (John 2:1–10). More importantly, Christ Himself is *the* figurative God of Wine, and so did He manifest Himself in the Institution of the Eucharist, or Last Supper, then commanding the faithful: "Drink ye all of it; for this [wine] is my blood and the new testament" (Matthew 26:27–29; see also Mark 14:12–25; Luke 22:7–23; John 13:21–30). Therefore, the fact of early instances of Christological appropriations of Bacchic imagery is not at all surprising, particularly in a funerary setting. According to Erwin Panofsky, "the passion of Dionysus is symbolic of the death and rebirth of nature in general and of the mysterious process by which the juice of the tortured grape is changed to wine in particular," and so such symbolic configurations uniting Bacchus and Christ were opportunely employed by the earliest Christian artists.³⁸

Early Christian exegetes likewise emphasized the putative functional connection between Christ and Bacchus, particularly because both figures had promised (as Panofsky put it) "salvation" in general, and "unending felicity after death" in particular. For instance, Justin notes (in his *Dialogus cum Tryphone Judaeo*) how Trypho the Jew had charged that the Gentiles had long been complaining that the life and nature of Christ had been stolen from *their* myth of Bacchus, as well as similar legends of Hercules and Aesculapius. The exegete's response is that, foreseeing that Christ would "tie his foal to a vine and wash His robes in the blood of the grape," those besotted pagans had been so motivated as to create their own myths of Bacchus.³⁹ Another apposite example is Celsus, whose opinion, so we are told by Origen (in his *Contra Celsum*), was that the biography of Christ had been gratuitously conflated out of the story of Bacchus, and also legends attached to Hercules and Orpheus.⁴⁰ All this notwithstanding, Hartt's final conclusion was that "it seems more probable that Michelangelo's image [of *Bacchus*] was entirely pagan."

³⁸ Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture*, 34. For detailed analyses of antique Dionysiac sepulchral iconography, metaphorically parallel in significant ways to early Christian representations, see Eisler, *Orphisch-dionysische Mysteringedanken*; Lehmann-Hartleben and Olsen, *Dionysiac Sarcophagi*; Turcan, *Les sarcophages romains*; for the specifically Hellenistic and Roman cultural contexts of these representations, see Bruhl, *Liber Pater*; Jeanmaire, *Dionysos: Histoire du culte de Bacchus*; Kerényi, *Die Herkunft der Dionysos-Religion*; idem., *Dionysos*; Nilsson, *The Dionysiac Mysteries*; Otto, *Dionysos: Mythos und Kultus*.

³⁹ Justin, as quoted in Allen, *Mysteriously Meant*, 3.

⁴⁰ Origen, as cited in *ibid.*, 12; for similar materials, see also Eisler, *Orphisch dionysische Mysteringedanken*; for the authority of Origen during the Renaissance, see Wind, "The Revival of Origen."

Nonetheless, it is relatively easy to document the literary existence, from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, of a decidedly “Christ-like” Bacchus. The larger phenomenon to which this particular topos belongs is “Euhemerism,” itself a staple of Renaissance Humanism. As practised by Christian interpreters, *Euhemerism* represented an application of “moral allegory” which turned the anthropomorphic, ostensibly pagan, antique gods into living personifications of Christian virtues and vices, so providing either useful models or antitypes for directing human conduct. So employed, pagan “myth” (*mythos*, a story) serves exemplary purposes, for it both adorns and reveals Christian truth.⁴¹ The first fully developed discussion of the “Christ-like” Bacchus motif is found in the often consulted text of the *Ovidius Moralizatus* composed by Petrus Berchorius (né Pierre Bersuire), who died in 1362. Initially composed in 1342, the *Ovidius Moralizatus* (“Moralized Ovid”) was first published in 1477. The historical significance of this pioneering mythographic manual is underscored by Erwin Panofsky: “Rivaled only by Boccaccio’s *Genealogia deorum* (and this exclusively in Italy), Berchorius’s mythographical *Introduction* and its derivatives constituted the most important source of information wherever classical divinities had to be depicted or described.”⁴²

In this case (and perhaps not surprisingly), Berchorius’s physical description of the pagan God of Wine happens generally to conform to Michelangelo’s sculptural representation of *Bacchus* (fig. 1). As described by the medieval mythographer, “His image was that of a boy with the face of a woman; his breast was bare . . . and he was crowned with vines.” To this seductive *imago* the medieval exegete immediately appends a “moralized” explanation, which initially explains in a negative sense that someone similarly drunken in appearance “is called a boy because of the insensate ignorance which drunken people are known to possess.” Additionally, “he has a woman’s face because a burning, eager desire for women is generated in drunken men by wine [and] wine weakens the souls of men and makes them women.” “He is partly nude,” continues Berchorius, “because drunken people easily reveal secrets, both their own and others’ [or] because drunkenness usually makes a person poor and takes his riches.” A feline

⁴¹ For Euhemerism, see esp. Barkan, *Gods Made Flesh*, ch. 3, “Metamorphosis in the Middle Ages” (excellent for context); Rivers, *Classical and Christian Ideas in Renaissance Poetry*; Seznec, *Survival of the Pagan Gods*.

⁴² Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences*, 79.

creature, here a tiger, accompanies Bacchus because these "are raging animals," meaning here that they are like immoderate drunkards.⁴³

Those strictly negative aspects of Berchorius's extended explanation of Bacchus repeated traits common to most earlier medieval descriptions. Most notable among these, as cited by Berchorius, were the treatises by Rabanus Maurus (*De Diis Gentium*) and Fulgentius (*Mythologiarum libri tres*). Nonetheless, that traditionally negative kind of prologue is quickly followed in 1342 by what Berchorius calls "a good explanation" of the meaning of Bacchus. This claims that "the wine is [or may represent] the Grace of God or the fervor of the Holy Spirit." According to Berchorius's alternative, but evidently influential interpretation, Bacchus:

is called a boy because of Purity; [he is shown] woman-like because of Piety; nude because of Truth, and horned because of Authority. He rides on [or subdues] tigers—that is, demons and tyrants—by treading them under foot. He is crowned with a vine—that is, with the Cross of Christ—through meditating on the Passion. He is called Dionysus—that is, "separated from" or "fleeing eagerly"—for having shunned the world and its sins, and by patiently sustaining the evil judgments of others. Or [we may] allegorize all these points about the blessed Dionysus, or about any [other] just man.⁴⁴

Stripped of their medieval allegorical embellishments, these strictly physical features—boyishness, nudity, feline, vine—are precisely those attributes characterizing Michelangelo's *Bacchus* (fig. 1). Further on, Berchorius does go on to "allegorize all these points," so making his initial Christological associations with the "drunken" Bacchus much more forceful and complicated:

Through Bacchus, who is drunk, there is perceived the True Faith which makes the servants of Christ drunk with the fervor of Devotion. Through Semele [his mother] is perceived the Jewish people. Through the Nymphs [of the Bacchic entourage] I perceive the Gentile and Pagan peoples. I say that Jupiter—that is, God the Father—impregnated Semele—that is, the Synagogue—with Bacchus—that is, the fervor of Faith—and He gave this Faith to her alone. According to Amos 3:2, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth." Semele [as the Synagogue] was turned into a crooked bow by killing Christ, and for this she was blasted by God. Bacchus—that is, the virtue of Faith—was taken from her and was handed over and entrusted to the Nymphs

⁴³ Berchorius, *Ovidius Moralizatus*, 97–98.

⁴⁴ Berchorius, *Ovidius Moralizatus*, 99.

of Nysa—that is, the Gentiles. For God the Father took the Catholic faith [i.e. Bacchus] from the Jewish people [i.e. Semele] and He entrusted it to the Gentile race, which did receive it gratefully and clothed and adorned it with ivy—that is, with the Philosophy and Science of the Gentiles.

So, from then on, the Gentiles dedicated their ivy—that is, their philosophical pursuits—to Bacchus—that is, to [Christian] Faith. Matthew 21: 43 states: “The kingdom of God will be taken from you and will be given to a nation yielding the fruits thereof.” Or one may say that Bacchus is Christ, who is called fire-born and twice-born [*bis natus*]. Deuteronomy 4:24 says: “Our God is a consuming fire.” He [Bacchus-Christ] was born twice, [first] from his Father to Divinity, and [secondly] from His mother to Humanity. Wound up in ivy—that is, in human flesh—He is given to the Nymphs—that is, to holy souls in the Sacrament of the Altar, and it is very devoutly accepted by them [as the Eucharist] through Faith and is nourished with the milk of Devotion. So [either] God the Father or the Virgin Mary can say to the [Christian] soul these words coming from Exodus 2:9: “Take this child [Bacchus-Christ] and nurse him for me and I will give you your wages.”⁴⁵

Berchorius even supplies a properly contextual explanation for the little “Satyr” (according to Condivi) who hides behind the left leg of Michelangelo’s *Bacchus* (fig. 1). Berchorius’s *Pan*, who “was called the god of nature by the Ancients and who was held by them as a representation of Universal Nature,” physically looks very much like Michelangelo’s “Satyr.” As explained by Berchorius, “He was depicted as a horned man with a red face. . . . His thighs were painted with plants and trees and . . . he had goat’s feet.”

In various ancient texts, the horned and goat-footed *Pan* was, of course, just another component of the standard Bacchic retinue, along with Satyrs (also horned and goat-footed), Centaurs, Maenads, Priapus and Silenus. But, and once again, the standard physical description of a stock classical figure inspires Berchorius to much Christian moral embellishment:

This Pan, according to Fulgentius and Rabanus, was the image of Nature. Along with his horns, his red face represented the highest part of the world—that is, fire and ether with rays. . . . His thighs covered with trees signify the animals and beasts. Love conquers him [Pan] because love literally overcomes Nature. These things [i.e., pagan superstitions] are nothing to us. But let us [as Christians] expound allegorically, and

⁴⁵ Berchorius, *Ovidius Moralizatus*, 188–90; see also 198–99, where Bacchus is metamorphosized into a figure of “Nave-Ecclesia-Fides.”

then we say that this nature god [Pan] can signify the True God of Nature, Himself our Lord Jesus Christ, whose heart seemed red because of burning charity. He [Christ-Pan] had a horned head because of unconquerable power. . . . He [Christ-Pan] had goat's feet, both because of the humility of His disposition, and because He took over our bodily humanity upon His feet—that is, when the time had been completed.⁴⁶

Since Berchorius's satyr-like Pan-Christ figure is immediately followed in his treatise by descriptions of Bacchus (just quoted), this Christian Pan contextually becomes a familiar member of the Bacchic troupe, just like a hairy legged and horned Satyr.

In sum, Berchorius's authoritative, wholly mythographic treatment of Bacchus has dramatically transfigured the pagan god by remaking him into a figure emblematic of positive, explicitly Christian values. Bacchus now represents the enthusiastic Faith which encourages the followers of Christ to become, Bechorius states, "drunk with fervor of devotion." Also without apparent precedent is Berchorius's forthright designation of Bacchus as a prefiguration of the New Testament; this was born from a discredited Old Testament faith, that is, "Semele-Synagogue," which "killed Christ." Even Bacchus's ivy-wreath becomes for Bechorius a sign of pagan philosophy and science, for it now adorns the noble brow of a thoroughly reconstructed figure standing for the Christian Faith. Once placed upon his forehead, the ivy also becomes a symbol of the Incarnation figured in the Eucharist, "the Sacrament of the Altar." Since Berchorius's *Ovidius moralizatus* has been acknowledged by modern scholarship to have constituted during the Quattrocento (according to Panofsky) "the most important source of information wherever classical divinities had to be depicted," it seems very likely that at least some of its revised Christian interpretation of the ancient Wine God must have rubbed off on Michelangelo's *Bacchus* (fig. 1).

The initial supposition becomes more like a fact after we read (in the next chapter) how Ficino had also clothed Bacchus in Christian mysticism. Additionally, we may recall the relatively recent date of Berchorius's first publication, in 1477, that is only a few years before the appearance of Ficino's neoplatonic texts and, shortly afterwards, Michelangelo's *Bacchus*. Moreover, Berchorius was certainly not the

⁴⁶ Berchorius, *Ovidius Moralizatus*, 94–95; for the physical and functional (Bacchic) alignments of Pan and Satyrs, see Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects*, 232–33 (Pan), 273–74 (Satyr).

only Renaissance mythographer to support this strictly Christian interpretation of Bacchus. For example, much the same thing was said long afterwards in England by Alexander Ross in his *Mystagogus Poeticus, or the Muses' Interpreter* (1648):

Moderate use of Wine . . . strengthens the body, comforts the heart, and breeds good blood. For which cause, Bacchus was always young; for Wine makes old men look young, if it be moderate, otherwise it makes them children; for so Bacchus is painted [as being] worshipped on the same Altar with Minerva [see **fig. 6**: Alciati's earlier emblem, obviously the "painting" known to Ross], and he was accompanied with the Muses, to shew that Wine is a friend to Wisdom and Learning [and] to shew that in Wine is Eloquence; and so likewise the naked truth, therefore Bacchus is always naked [and he] was called *Liber* [free], because Wine makes a man talk freely, and it freeth the minde from cares, and maketh a man have free and high thoughts; it makes a Beggar a Gentleman. . . . Bacchus is the Author of generation of all things, as well as of Wine. . . . He is a friend to the Muses, for by his influence our wits are refined.

Besides showing this author's evident familiarity with Alciati's standard *Book of Emblems* (**figs. 6, 14**), more important is the fact that Ross's grand finale represents an especially enthusiastic, post-classical reversion to the *moralizatus*, or Christ-like, late medieval position set forth by Berchorius regarding Bacchus-Dionysus. According to Ross,

Christ is the true Dionysius, *Dios nous*, the Minde of God, the Internal Word of the Father, born of a [virgin] Woman without man's help, as the Grecians fable their Bacchus to be; and yet they give credit to their figment, and not unto our [Christian] truth. He is *Liber*, who makes us onely free. . . . His body [like Christ's] was torn with Thorns, Nails, and Whips; and He went down to Hell, but he revived and rose again: He is the true friend of Wisdom and Learning; and who hath given to us a more comfortable Wine than the Wine of the Grape: that Wine which we shall drink new with him in his Kingdom. . . . He [Christ and/or Bacchus] is still young, as not subject now to mortality.⁴⁷

Quite unaware of this ongoing tradition of Bacchus-Christ conflations (just as are most modern students of Michelangelo's *Bacchus*), centuries later the poet Shelley found in Michelangelo's dissipated wine-god little more than "an expression of dissoluteness the most revolting," even a "mistake of the spirit and meaning of Bacchus."⁴⁸ As may

⁴⁷ Ross, *Mystagogus Poeticus*, 39–43.

⁴⁸ Shelley, as quoted (in full) in Symonds, *Life of Michelangelo*, 39–40. Much the

be remarked parenthetically, "dissolute" drunkenness in Shelley's time had its own cultural significance,⁴⁹ one quite different from an elevated state of, say, philosophical or creative Inebriation, or even that religious Intoxication, which had been often celebrated by classical poets—and even some Renaissance artists (see **figs. 1, 6, 14**).⁵⁰

But that more or less commonplace Renaissance mode of positive evaluation of vinous intoxication seems generally foreign to the preceding, early medieval period (that is, before Berchorius). Back then, "Drunkenness" was most commonly read as a sign of bestiality, the kind characterized by "uncleanness, buffoonery, foolish joy, loquaciousness, and dullness," and so potentially leading to "Cardinal Sins" of *Gula* (Gluttony) and *Luxuria* (Sensuality). That alternative position is attested to by a moralized tale told in the *Gesta Romanorum* ("Deeds of the Romans," ca. 1350), among a swarming host of other pious texts to the same point which one could cite. For this medieval moralizer, the proper concluding tag could only be: "Let us then pray to the Lord to preserve us in all sobriety, that we may hereafter be invited

same was recently concluded about Michelangelo's *Bacchus* by Linda Murray (*Michelangelo*, 32): "It is the unregenerate soul gazing at the uplifted cup of wine. . . . It is the expression of untrammelled natural desire, swayed by passions. . . . It is the antithesis of the divine afflatus of spiritual ecstasy."

⁴⁹ For an enlightening view of post-Renaissance views on "Drunkenness," see Schivelbusch, *Tastes of Paradise*, esp. 147 ff. In short, Shelley lived in a newly industrialized, *post-Renaissance* age, one uniquely conditioned by excessive consumption of *distilled* spirits, themselves largely associated (*in malo*) with a "dissolute" or degenerated proletariat, or factory-bound working class (cf. Hogarth's *Gin Lane*, an even earlier social marker of the dishonorably dissipated "post-wine" age). For something wholly different, ancient precedents of "sober intoxication" in the context of the Dionysiac Mysteries, see Lewy, *Sobria ebrietas* (see also other works cited above).

⁵⁰ For some earlier Bacchic precedents, see Wind, *Bellini's Feast of the Gods*; followed by Fehl, "The Worship of Bacchus and Venus in Bellini's and Titian's 'Bacchanals' for Alfonso d'Este" (showing Bellini's picture to have been authored by Giovanni de' Bonsignori, who departed from the strict letter of classical texts, and how Titian's painting combined motifs from Ovid and Catullus). For somewhat similar Renaissance textual representations of Comus, son of Bacchus, see Steadman, "A Mask at Ludlow: Comus and Dionysiac Revel," in his *Nature Into Myth*, 212–40, 296–98. For a list of traditional subjects or themes commonly encountered in standard, later Renaissance and Baroque, depictions of Bacchus (none quite like Michelangelo's), see Pigler, *Barockthemen*, II, "Profane Darstellungen," 42–45 (nine topical entries as done by various artists). For a contextual analysis of a famous Baroque-period painting dealing in a positive way with "Bacchic Drunkenness," Velázquez's so-called *Los Borrachos* (1629), see Moffitt, "'In Vino Veritas': Velázquez, Baco y Pérez de Moya"; Moffitt, *Velázquez, Práctica e Idea*, 67–73, "La cofradía de Baco"; for the "in vino veritas" topos specifically applied to Michelangelo's *Bacchus*, however merely as "a humorous presentation," see Barolsky, *Infinite Jest*, 52–52, 212 (but I think Michelangelo's intention was rather more serious).

to a feast in heaven. Amen.”⁵¹ Nonetheless, the *Gesta Romanorum* represents old-fashioned, medieval prejudices negative to common, meaning “lower-class,” intoxication through over-indulgence. These were attitudes afterwards overturned by Renaissance Humanism in favor of a kind of creative “Inspiration” to be achieved by cultivated, or “upper-class,” spiritual Intoxication of the sort (“*tirar dal senso*”) specifically attributed by Condivi to Michelangelo’s *Bacchus* (fig. 1).

⁵¹ *Gesta Romanorum*, Tale CLXXIX, “Of Gluttony and Drunkenness,” 345–47. Much the same negative approach is found in a popular German text contemporary to Michelangelo’s *Bacchus*, Sebastian Brant’s *Ship of Fools* (1494); see Brant, *Das Narrenschiff*, 62–66, “Von Völlerei und Prassen.” Brant’s *Narrenschiff* also included (in chapter 66, “Alle Länder erforschen wollen,” 236–42, also containing the first published notice of Columbus’s discovery of America, as a “Goldinsel” populated with “nackte Leut”) a diatribe directed against *Bacchus* himself: “Daß jeder lernte trinken Wein . . . [und] mehr Durst als Freude bringt . . . [und] uns viel Übles nur gebracht.” Other standard (and less “popular”) medieval texts which had earlier conveyed, in a wholly negative sense, the same negative appraisal of Bacchic drunkenness (and other Dionysiac effects) include: Arnolfo d’Orléans, *Allegoriae*, 3:3, 7–8; Fulgentius, *Mythologiarum*, 15; John of Garland, *Integumenta Ovidii*, I: 159 ff.; Mythographus Vaticanus III, *Fabulae*, 12:3–5; Anon., *Ovide Moralisé*, Intro., 3: 856 ff., 4: 2502 ff.; Polydor Vergil, *De Rerum Inventoribus*, 3: 3; Rabanus Maurus, *De Universo*, 15:6 (texts cited in Lee, “Gardens and Gods,” 122–24, 301–2; nn. 126–36). A logical starting point for these opinions *in malo* would have been Isidorus Hispalensis, *Etymologiae*, 18:51 (ca. 630), noting that even though “it is obvious the dramatic arts come under the patronage of *Bacchus* and *Venus*,” these are “dissolute gods”; ergo: “Oh Christian, you must then abhor this kind of spectacle, just as you must abhor its patrons”: *Etimologías*, 457; see also p. 205 (*Etym.* 8.11): “Liber [*Bacchus*] is so called from *liberamento* [‘to liberate,’ but probably still meaning Dionysiac ‘spiritual release’]. . . . *Bacchus* is painted with the delicate body of a woman since women and wine excite [or let loose] lasciviousness.” Quite differently, the Renaissance mythographers whom I quote usually take Bacchic *liberamento* to mean “freedom,” and then almost in the modern, or quasi-political, sense (see esp. Ross and Valeriano, as quoted above).

CHAPTER FIVE

THE NEOPLATONIC BACCHUS OF THE RENAISSANCE

Bacchus Reborn in the Renaissance, “all’antica”

Written evidence documents the emergence at the end of the Quattrocento of a very different point of view regarding figurative Dionysiac “transports.” At once aristocratic and philosophical, the Renaissance position on Inspiration was one which was very concretely anchored in the svelte but tipsy figure of a newly “moralized” Bacchus, supposedly recreated *all’antica*. In the strictly visual sense, the decidedly wobbly balance of Michelangelo’s figure represents a nearly clinical (*eikastic* or naturalistic) condition of precarious, but essentially “merry,” inebriation (**fig. 1**). Charles de Tolnay interprets positively some symbolic connotations of this tipsy condition: “Michelangelo represents his *Bacchus* as the human incarnation of the vine which takes its force from the earth, and which, like vegetation, revives with the spring.” For confirmation of his hypothesis, de Tolnay cites the Italian edition (1564) of Boccaccio’s *De Genealogia Deorum*, where “this god signifies wine and his mother, Semele, the vine itself, and the father, Zeus, is warmth. This warmth, together with the moisture of the earth, goes through the vine, ripens the grapes and fills them with juice in the spring, as a womb in conception.”¹

Still, once one actually bothers to consult the particular Latin edition of Boccaccio (*Genealogiae*, Venice, 1494) which would have been most likely available to a Florentine humanist at that time, an even broader understanding of Bacchus emerges. Here Dionysus is designated the “superior Father and Sower-Cultivator of the Vine,” with Boccaccio also noting how, rather like Michelangelo’s *Bacchus*, “he was depicted in Antiquity as a nude youth or in woman’s dress [and] he has tigers running alongside.” Perhaps more significantly, Boccaccio tells us (quoting Servius’ commentary on the *Aeneid*) that “Father

¹ Boccaccio, as quoted in Tolnay, *Michelangelo I*, 143–44.

Freedom is [seen to be] holy for he pertains to the cleansing of the soul, and men are purged by means of his mysteries,” and these *mysteria* “cleanse the mind, relieve tedium, and lead to tranquility.” Moreover, according to Boccaccio (following, he says, Albricus), Bacchus represents “the World-Soul.” He is to be depicted naked to symbolize how “his drunkenness reveals all secrets.” Finally, paraphrasing Proverbs 31, Boccaccio (like several later authors we shall quote) presents Bacchus as a positive emblem of “liberation” from poverty and other earthly cares.²

But, from a strictly contemporary (mid-1490s) perspective applying to Michelangelo’s *Bacchus*, Boccaccio seems perhaps not the most significant textual reference. That essential text is provided by an unquestionably influential contemporary, the Florentine philosopher Marsilio Ficino, himself a protégé of the Medici (as was Michelangelo, but to a lesser degree). According to Ficino, and as I shall document shortly, the same kind of jocosely tipsy drunkenness that characterizes Michelangelo’s figure was expressly taken to represent an essential marker pointing to the “divine” nature of Bacchus. The metaphorically inebriated Bacchic condition now additionally applies to those elevated, and likewise “divine,” literary minds who gratefully partake in moderation of his purgative, and so “liberating,” gifts.³

As situated within Galli’s sculpture gardens in Rome near Castel Sant’Angelo, the Florentine’s inebriated *Bacchus* was surrounded by genuine antique artifacts. According to Constance Gibbons Lee, these evocative antiquities were arranged by Galli to expand upon the myth and cult of Dionysios, particularly in his positive role as a

² Boccaccio, *Genealogiae*, fols. 44–45: “O Dionyse pater optime viti sator. . . . Pingebant est eum antiquos in habitu mulierbri & nudum atque puerum [et] tygres autem ideo currum trahunt [i.e., as in Philostratus, *Imagines*, I, 15: quoted earlier]. . . . Liberi patris sacra ad purgationem animae pertinere; & sic homines eius mysteriis purgantur [et] post praeterium cerebri stuporem animum exutis curis tediis, atque ejectis remanere tranquillum. . . . Hoc Albericus Bacchum animam mundi intelligendum. . . . Nudus vero ideo pingisse quia ebrius omnia pandat secreta. Liber autem pater dicit qua hominibus libertatem videatur . . . pauperes ab opportunitatibus reddit immunes,” i.e., according to a theme derived as much from Horace as from Proverbs 31, both as quoted above.

³ Curiously, with the briefly stated exception of Carman, “Michelangelo’s ‘Bacchus,’” I find no significant mention of Ficino in the scholarly literature specifically treating Michelangelo’s *Bacchus* (for instance, as cited in Chapter 1, n. 2 above); my citations of Ficino’s applicable, specifically “Bacchic,” commentaries should soon make this traditional interpretative lacuna seem rather odd.

“nature deity.”⁴ This carefully contrived classicizing arrangement is made clear by Martin Heemskerck’s sketch of ca. 1534, showing Michelangelo’s statue *in situ* and as it appeared before its present, somewhat restored state (**fig. 5**).⁵ In such a symbolically charged

⁴ For an exhaustive recreation of the original context, see Lee, “Gardens and Gods,” who ably documents her hypothesis that all the antiquities in Galli’s sculpture-garden were arranged by this gentleman to relate to Michelangelo’s *Bacchus*, either on a mythical or cultic level. She, however, accepts at face value Condivi’s statement that Galli—rather than Riario—actually commissioned the work; for the documents now attesting to the commission coming instead from Cardinal Riario, see Hirst, “Michelangelo in Rome.” Consequently, all of Galli’s programmatic interpretations—if there *were* any such—actually came *after* the fact, and so they do not necessarily represent any meanings originally attached to “Bacchus” by its Florentine author, Michelangelo. In fact, Galli’s real “programme” instead might have been that of the currently fashionable motif of the “locus amoenus” (for which see Curtius, *European Literature*, 199–200). Since this point is peripheral to my main argument, I will only give the evidence, and cite the bibliography attending the larger motif. In the lower left hand corner of Heemskerck’s drawing of Galli’s sculpture-garden (**fig. 5**) one sees the battered (missing the head and right arm) remnant of a “Sleeping Nymph,” which now, considerably restored, may be seen in the Vatican Museums (Bober and Rubenstein, *Renaissance Artists and Antique Sculpture*, cat. no. 62); the motif of Nymph as a sign of the “Garden of Venus” became popular after the retrieval, ca. 1480, by Cyriacus of Ancona of a probably apocryphal inscription belonging to such an antique “garden-sculpture”; for which see Brummer, *Statue Garden*, 154–84; Gombrich, “The Belvedere Garden as a Grove of Venus,” in his *Symbolic Images*, 104–8; Kurz, “Huius Nympha Locī”; MacDougall, “The Sleeping Nymph.” According to this alternative argument (which I shall not press), Galli’s first idea for his sculpture-garden may have belonged to this category of conventional humanist arrangement, but possibly the addition of Michelangelo’s *Bacchus* altered the plan, if indeed it may even be called a “plan” (as one doubts from the rather chaotic appearance of the *giardino*, as in **fig. 5**). Nonetheless, since a common alternative “caption” applied to this figural arrangement was “Ariadne,” and since she was known to have been “discovered by Bacchus,” then Michelangelo’s sculpture could have fit into a (very loose) “programme” in this other way; for one such combination, Bacchus and Ariadne, also illustrating its likely precedents “all’antica,” see Moffitt, “Un dibujo del ‘Descubrimiento de Ariadne’ por Jusepe Ribera.”

⁵ Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, 178–81, discusses in some detail the restorations applied to Michelangelo’s figure after its removal from Galli’s garden, particularly to the cup-bearing right hand. Curiously, another iconographically significant anatomical lacuna—the broken phallus—is not mentioned. From such a distinguished student of the Mysteries, this omission is itself mysterious, inasmuch as the missing member should have at least been cited in passing as an essential attribute at the historic Dionysiac rituals, where a (broken) *phallos* was usually placed in a *liknon* (winnowing-basket); for the surviving texts on ancient Bacchic rituals (some being known to Renaissance litterati), see Meyer, *Ancient Mysteries*, 67–109; see also Kerényi, *Dionysius: Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life*; Otto, *Dionysus, Myth and Cult*. Just to cite one example of a Renaissance cognizance of the Bacchic broken bit, Vincenzo Cartari made prominent mention (*Le Imagini*, esp. 441–47) of the fact that “Priapo è il medesimo che Baccho,” and often mentions a certain priapic artifact (and erect, to boot) commonly connected with his rites, namely, “il membro naturale dritto e difeso.”

location, it was only proper that, just as Condivi specified, “in form and bearing this work [should] correspond, in every part, to the descriptions belonging to the ancient writers.”

But to which particular texts by “ancient writers” does this sculpture most closely correspond? One of the most logical textual sources would have certainly been, once again, Pliny.⁶ He observed (*NH* 34:69) how the famed Praxiteles, “although more successful, and therefore more celebrated, in marble, nevertheless also made some very beautiful works in bronze.” Most prominent among these was, states Pliny, the masterful figure of Bacchus, *Pater Liber* or “Father Freedom,” who represented, in a single allegorical unit [*una*], a sculptural ensemble portraying “Noble Intoxication, posed with a Satyr.” (*Liber Pater, [sive] Ebrietas nobile, et satyrus*). Praxiteles’ wholly admirable (but long-since lost) composition, combining both Bacchus and a Satyr, and just as they are shown in Michelangelo’s apparent *mimesis* (**fig. 1**), was, Pliny notes, “known among the Greeks as ‘Renowned’ [*περιβοητος*-*periboetos*, roughly ‘world-famous’].”⁷ The enduring fame of this legendary work during the Renaissance is visually attested to by Alciati’s emblem depicting the “Statua Bacchi” designed by Praxiteles (**fig. 6**).

Whatever might have been the various meanings assigned to the phrase “Pater Liber” in Antiquity, standard Renaissance texts discussing Bacchus as a moral emblem largely support one’s post-medieval reading of the title as mainly representing “Father Freedom.” Nonetheless, this interpretation admittedly seems at variance with standard, much earlier, Roman sources. For instance, Ovid (*Fasti*, III, 725 ff.) asserts that Bacchus’s *Liber* comes from/means *libamen* or *libatio* = “offerings,” while Cicero (*De Natura Deorum*, II, 60–63) argues that “*liberi* means ‘children’, or ‘offspring’.” Nonetheless, and as we have just seen, this strictly post-classical interpretation of *Pater Liber* as “Father Freedom” had also—that is, since Berchorius—commonly acquired specifically Christian significance.

We have already read how Alexander Ross, for instance, made this point perfectly clear in 1648, stating that Bacchus presently serves

⁶ In this instance, I owe the impetus for the specifically Plinian connection to the Renaissance Bacchus, as “ekphrasis,” to Summers, *Language of Art*, 265. However as he did not, I have extended this ekphrastic argument in order to embrace (or enhance) earlier “pagan” works by Michelangelo.

⁷ For this reading of Pliny’s Latin text, and for Callistratus on Praxiteles’s *Dionysios*, see ch. 3, n. 24 above.

to demonstrate “that Wine is a friend to Wisdom and Learning,” and that “in Wine is Eloquence; and so, likewise, the naked truth.” This post-classical Bacchus is now routinely designated the god of freedom, as, affirms Ross, he “was called *Liber*, because Wine makes a man talk freely.” Most significantly, “he is a friend to the Muses, for by his influence our wits are refined.” Even more important, in this specifically post-classical context, there is a now-entrenched belief that “Christ is the true Dionysus,” and for being another god “born of a [virgin] Woman without man’s help.” Just like the flesh of Christ martyred in His Passion, Ross states that Bacchus’s “body was torn with Thorns, Nails, and Whips; and He went down to Hell, but he revived and rose again.” Above all, this thoroughly Christian Bacchus “is the true friend of Wisdom and Learning; and [it is his] Wine which we shall drink new with him in his [heavenly] Kingdom.”⁸

Another case in point is Pierio Valeriano’s widely consulted *Hieroglyphica* (1556), where the encyclopedist specifically treats Bacchus under the explicit rubric of “Liberty.”⁹ Valeriano announces in a forthright fashion that his “grape-vine is itself an index of Liberty, and so even the names of Bacchus, whom the Greeks call *Lyaeus* [i.e., λυαιος, ‘the Liberator’] and the Latins *Liber* [‘Free’], demonstrate this fact.” As he continues, “this interpretation of [Bacchus as] Liberty accommodates itself to an idea introduced by Heliogabus: during the joyous season of the harvest it was permitted to every laborer to rail against, or make joyous fun of his master, even in his very presence.” There is even a Scriptural, or Old Testament, precedent, however farfetched in its forced application to the Bacchus of pagan myth. Valeriano

⁸ Ross, *Mystagogus Poeticus*, 39–43.

⁹ Valeriano, *Les Hieroglyphiques*, 710, “Liberté” (the first Latin edition of the *Hieroglyphica* appeared in 1556, as dedicated to Cosimo de’ Medici, with several re-printings and translations following, including this French version I cite). A standard medieval precedent for what follows would be the statement (ca. 500) in Fulgentius, *Mythologiae*, XII, according to which Bacchus “is called *Pater Liber* because the rage of wine frees men’s minds”: Whitehead, *Fulgentius the Mythographer*, 77; likewise, but much more oddly (in 596 AD), as in Isidore of Seville (*Etymologiae*, VIII, 43): “*Liber* (Bacchus) is thus named a *liberamento*, from ‘liberate,’ as males might be freed from cohabitation [with women] through emitting their semen by mediation [i.e., masturbation]” (*Etimologías*, 205). Nonetheless, Valeriano made his Bacchus argument much more *in bono*, and probably for following Ficino or Pico (both as quoted here), and possibly even Berchorius (also as quoted here). Also, like other Renaissance authors, his notion of Bacchic “freedom” often leans more towards an external or political application than strictly to the largely psychological notion of wholly internalized Dionysiac “transport.”

announces that, “to prove that wine is taken in the [positive] meaning of abandon and liberty, I am going to cite an example made to this end, which is taken from the story of Moses.”

As told in a somewhat confused fashion by Valeriano, this tale, in brief, deals with the Pharaoh’s wine-steward who was imprisoned at the same place as Joseph, who had guarded his “innocence” from Potiphar’s wife. This butler saw in a dream a thyrsus-like, triple scepter with three bunches of grapes, which he pressed, and then he presented his oneiromantic wine to the king. The point is a prophecy, according to which Joseph was to be delivered, like the wine, “after three days of misery in which he had languished.” That farfetched “story of Moses” (actually a gross corruption of Genesis 40:9–13) was here, and by a long stretch of the imagination, taken to compare Moses (not Joseph) to Bacchus. As used by Valeriano, the underlying topos was, as Don Cameron Allen states, the “rather stale identification of Moses with Bacchus-Dionysus,” an equation often employed by various other Renaissance authors.¹⁰

Neoplatonic “Noble Intoxication”

What is now required for our contextual analysis of evolving notions of “Dionysiac Inspiration”—and as here taken to be concretely personified by Michelangelo’s *Bacchus* (**fig. 1**)—is a complementary review of some contemporary praise for the state of quasi-divine *Ebrietas nobile*, or Noble Intoxication, and such as this was produced in Italy during the Renaissance. The wholly new twist was then to treat this tipsy condition as a positively perceived stimulus, even as an essential element, for Creative Inspiration.¹¹

In this instance, my *prima facie* testimony—and as drawn from the Florentine intellectual contexts directly shaping the young Michel-

¹⁰ For several applications of the Moses-Bacchus configuration, see Allen, *Mysteriously Meant*, 65, 69, 70, 73, 75, 80; according to Allen, a principal, late antique source seems to have been Nonnos, *Dionysiaca*; see also Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, 277–78, citing Numbers 12:7 ff. as the source for Neoplatonists later to discuss the “same divine state of disencumbered [Bacchic] ecstasy as vouchsafed by God to Moses.” He also quotes Pico to that effect: “Dux Bacchus in suis mysteriis . . . inebriabit nos . . . uti Moyses.”

¹¹ For an earlier (but brief) introduction to what follows here, see Chastel, *Ficin et l’art*, 142–46, “*Furor divinus*: l’inspiration.”

angelo—comes from Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), particularly from his *De vita triplici* (first published in 1489).¹² Ficino's important links to the Medici milieu of the young Michelangelo are well known. More to point, and according to Erwin Panofsky, "among all his contemporaries Michelangelo was the only one who adopted [essentially Ficinian] Neoplatonism, not in certain aspects but in its entirety, and not as a convincing philosophical system, let alone as the fashion of the day, but as a metaphysical justification of his own self."¹³ Moreover, Ficino's widely discussed treatise "On the Tripartite Life" was itself dedicated to the Florentine ruler, Lorenzo de' Medici, Michelangelo's first important patron, and so the Prologue to Book One, "De Vita," contains this timely dedication: "Ad magnanimum Laurentium Medicem Patriae Servatore."

This preface begins with a Bacchic paean comparing "merry," or even "jocular" Dionysiac drunkenness with the most elevated, even "reborn," sacerdotal state. According to the Florentine scholar,

The poets sing that Bacchus, supreme prelate of priests, was born twice [*bis natum*]. This signifies either that one who is going to be a priest should be reborn at the moment of his initiation, or perhaps that when one finally becomes a perfected priest [*perfecti sacerdotis*], when his mind, now deeply drunken with God [*mentem Deo penitus ebriam*], appears now to have been reborn [*renatum*]. Or perhaps, in a less exalted sense, the poets mean that wine, the seed of Bacchus, is born once on the vine, like Semele, when the clusters are ripe beneath Phoebus [meaning Apollo, and, as used here, also the Sun]. . . . Having started [this preface] somehow with Father Freedom [*Liber Pater*], we should not continue in a style that [solely] expresses gravity; rather we should proceed in a [literary] style that is itself rather more free and jocular [*stilo . . . libero potius et iocoso*]. . . . Perhaps it is Bacchus who heals more salubriously with his nourishing wine and carefree jollity [*vino securitateque laetissima salubrius*] than does Phoebus [Apollo] with his herbs and songs.

¹² The citations following conform to the Latin text, as given in Ficino, *Three Books on Life*; to avoid end-note clutter, chapter and section numbers are indicated in the text.

¹³ On this specific issue, see Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, 171–230, "The Neoplatonic Movement and Michelangelo," with later literature cited in *ibid.*, pp. x–xiv (and with this citation appearing on p. 180); see also Clements, *Michelangelo's Theory*, ch. 1, "Beauty, Intellect, and Art." For the broader point of view, see also Chastel, *Marsilio Ficino et l'art* (with a few, somewhat generalized, references to Michelangelo; see *ibid.*, 165 n. 23, 178, 180 n. 5); Eisenbichler and Pugliese, *Ficino and Renaissance Neoplatonism*; Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*.

Elsewhere (Book II, 13), concerning Bacchus and his divine gift to mortals—wine—we read Ficino explaining how the god, as *Pater Liber*, “hates slaves, and that life which he promises by his wine he gives for a long time only to the free.” The common leit-motiv running throughout Ficino’s therapeutic treatise is that wine, the generous gift from “Father Freedom” to mere mortals, is “a thing to preserve youth [*ad servandam iuventutem*].” Moreover (II, 20), “in wine there is promised perpetual freedom from care [*perpetuam in vino securitatem*].” Still, like all other good things, including gifts from the gods, wine (like nourishing food) must be taken in moderation, to prevent satiety (I, 7). Likewise, “just as the use of wine helps the spirits and the intelligence, so the abuse [of wine] harms them” (I, 10). Above all, wine, as “a positive gift” (*donum in bono*) from Father Freedom, “feeds the spirit and intellect” (III, 24). As Ficino further explains in some detail:

Every one of you [referring to the *litterati*, or creative spirits], therefore, is almost wholly spirit; I call [you] a spiritual man [*spiritualis homo*], one who is disguised in this little earthly body, wearying his spirit with constant labor more than others do, so that, more than theirs, the literary man’s spirit must be constantly renewed. Moreover in old age, when generally the body becomes grosser, it must be recalled to its proper subtlety. You are fully aware that the gross body is fed with the four gross elements [i.e., earth, water, air, fire, each marking a psychological “temperament”]. You should know, therefore, that the spiritual body [*spiritale corpus*] is nourished with its own four subtler elements.

Thus to this spiritual body [i.e., the intellect] wine is offered in the place of earth; the odor of wine takes the place of [the element] water; song and sound acts as its air; light represents the element of fire. By these four traits especially, the spirit is fed by wine, I say: by its odor, by song, and, similarly, by light. Therefore, we immediately proceed to make mention of Bacchus. And rightly indeed we proceed [according to this invocation] from light to heat, from ambrosia to nectar, and from the intuition of truth to an ardent love of truth. . . . Bacchus brings us principally two things in particular: wine and the odor of wine to renew the spirit, by the daily employment of which the spirit finally becomes Apollonian and liberated [i.e., both enlightened and free: *tandem Phoebeus evadit et liber*].

There should be no doubts about Ficino’s consistently positive opinion of Bacchus, especially his role as a kind of essential patron of the creative, “free” spirit. One reads, at the very end of this treatise (in his “Apologia,” dated September 15, 1489, at his Medici-donated Villa Careggi), how Ficino directly identifies himself with this same god, Bacchus, and Pico della Mirandola he, in turn, metaphorically

dubs "Apollo," his Bacchic companion. As Ficino exclaims, "Rise and greet Pico, our Phoebus. I often call him my 'Phoebus,' and he likewise calls me 'Dionysus' and 'Liber,' for we are brothers."

In this specifically Bacchic context, Ficino had good reason to cite his close friend and fellow scholar, Count Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494). A decisive case in point is Pico's famed *Oratio de hominis dignitate* (1486, "Oration on Human Dignity"), a treatise commonly considered a central, humanist manifesto. Pico here echoed Ficino's interpretation of Bacchus as the patron of both Philosophy and Creative Endeavor. Pico introduces (*Oratio*, Article 15) his Dionysiac arguments by picturing, as had some medieval authors, Moses as one uniquely made privy to "the holy and unspeakable wisdom by whose nectar [i.e. liquor] the angels are made drunk." The next conclusion reached (art. 16) by Pico is that "not only the Mosaic and Christian mysteries, but also the Theology of the Ancients, show us the benefits and value of the Liberal Arts." As Pico asks,

What else did the degrees of the initiates observed in the [Dionysiac] Mysteries of the Greeks mean? They arrived at a perception of the Mysteries when they had first been purified through those expiatory sciences [i.e., as a prefiguration of the *artes liberales*], as it were, Moral Philosophy and Dialectic. What else can that perception [of the Dionysiac Mysteries] possibly be than an interpretation of Occult Nature by means of Philosophy? Then, at length to those who were so disposed, came that *Epotheia* [initiation], that is to say, the observation of things divine by the light of Theology. Who would not long to be initiated into such sacred rites . . . so to become the guest of the gods while yet living on earth, and, made drunk by the nectar of eternity, to be endowed with the gifts of immortality, though still a mortal being? Who would not wish to become so inflamed with those Socratic frenzies sung by Plato in the *Phaedrus*? . . . Let us be driven then by the [creative] frenzies of Socrates, so they may so throw us into ecstasy, so as to put our mind and ourselves in God.

For those familiar, as was Ficino, "with those Socratic frenzies sung by Plato in the *Phaedrus*," it was inevitable that Pico would be immediately moved to introduce Bacchus, and specifically as "the leader of the Muses," into his increasingly impassioned, indeed "ecstatic," argument:

Through Dialectic our reason has moved progressively in a rhythmical measure; then we shall be stirred by the frenzy of the Muses, and we then will come to drink the heavenly harmony with our inmost hearing. Thereupon, in his Mysteries, that is in the visible signs of Nature, Bacchus, the leader of the Muses, will show to us who study Philosophy

the invisible things of God, and will intoxicate us with the fullness of God's house, in which, if we prove faithful, like Moses, there shall come hallowed [Christian] Theology, which will inspire us with a doubled frenzy. . . . And at last, roused by ineffable love as by a sting, like burning Seraphim rapt from ourselves, full of divine power, we shall no longer be ourselves, but shall instead become He Himself [the Christian God] Who has made us.¹⁴

In this way Pico expressed himself concerning Bacchus' new role in sponsoring a "Poetic Theology" particular to Florentine Humanism and deeply tinged with Christian mysticism. This is unquestionably the particular, intellectual-spiritual, milieu situating the once-understood meanings of Michelangelo's *Bacchus* (fig. 1). But, according to the fashion of the time, these meanings must be constructed in an "emblematic" fashion. In a often-cited letter of 1490, Poliziano, whom we earlier observed inaugurating Michelangelo into the mysteries of veiled allegorical references, had complained about the demands put to him to compose "*impresae*," that is, proto-emblematic figures, and he defined an *impresa* as "a symbol which may only be intelligible to a close friend, but which only excites in vain the conjectures of others." As Poliziano also spoke of "the secretive [Dionysian] *mysteria*," and the real meaning of these must be kept secret and not shared with the vulgar crowd, for to do otherwise would be like "providing dogs with what is holy and throwing pearls before swine."¹⁵ Pico had said much the same thing in the introduction to his *Heptaplus* (1487), then affirming that it was the custom of ancient sages

never to write down divine matters, or only to do so in a veiled manner. Whence comes their name: "mysteries" (and there never can be any *mysteria* if something remains unconcealed). This was what they had learned from the Egyptians, and that is what was meant by the sphinxes placed in front of their temples; so instructed, Pythagoras became a master of silence. Our Plato has so well hidden his doctrine beneath the veils of enigmas and mythic symbols, and by mathematical images and obscure reasoning, that he himself declared in his correspondence that no one would have been able to clearly comprehend his writings upon divinity.¹⁶

¹⁴ Pico, *Oratio*, as given (complete) in Kristeller, *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, 223–54 (where these citations appear on 232–34); for Pico's "Poetic Theology," see Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, 17–25.

¹⁵ Poliziano, as quoted in Chastel, *Ficin et l'art*, 157, 165 n. 2: "Mysteria secretiora . . . plebi palam, facere, quid erat aliud quam dare sanctum canibus et inter porcos spargere margaritas."

¹⁶ Pico, as quoted in *ibid.*, 155.

But, again, Pico and Poliziano were not alone in Florence in advocating veiled enigmas pertaining to the Dionysiac *mysteria*, and by no means do the preceding citations from Marsilio Ficino constitute the only significant Bacchic references in *his* extensive literary legacy. For instance, in the preface to Ficino's translation of Dionysus the Areopagite's "Mystical Dionysiac Theology" (*In Dionysium Areopagitam*, ca. 1493), the name "Dionysus" offers the philosopher-author yet another occasion for describing as "Bacchic" that kind of ecstatic approach to God which employs a negation, even obliteration, of the intellect.¹⁷ Ficino's prayer ends with an address to the Christian Trinity: "*eadem prorsus oratione trinitas obsecranda.*" However, what follows next deals in great detail with the somewhat novel (that is, before 1490) topic of divine, even "noble," Intoxication. As it turns out, all of Ficino's arguments are largely in harmony with what was stated much earlier concerning certain celebrated, even inebriated and so "inspired," ancient Bacchic representations. Among these, most notable are those mentioned by Pliny and, particularly, Callistratus—evidently Condivi's "scrittori antichi," and so cited in his specific reference to Michelangelo's *Bacchus* (fig. 1).

Just as had those "ancient authors" defined the familiar Bacchic condition, so had Ficino explained that:

The spirit of the god Dionysus was believed by the ancient theologians and Platonists to represent the ecstasy and abandon of disencumbered minds, when partly by innate love, partly at the instigation of the god [Bacchus], they transgress the natural limits of intelligence, and they are [thereby] miraculously transformed into the beloved god himself: where, inebriated by a certain new draft of nectar and by an immeasurable joy, they rage, as it were, in a Bacchic frenzy [*ubi novo quodam nectaris haustu, et inexistentabili gaudio velut ebrie, ut ita dixerim, debacchantur*]. In the drunkenness of this Dionysiac wine our Dionysus expresses his exultation: he pours forth enigmas; he sings in dithyrambs. . . . In order to penetrate the profundity of his meanings [and] to imitate his quasi-Orphic manner of speech, we too [as modern *litterati*] require the divine fury. And by the same prayer, let us implore the [Christian] Trinity that the same light which God had infused into Dionysus in answer to his pious wish—that he might penetrate the mysteries of the [Christian] Prophets and the Apostles—may likewise be infused into us [as Christians] who make a similar supplication.¹⁸

¹⁷ What immediately follows is essentially derived from Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, 62.

¹⁸ Ficino, as quoted in Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, 62, as drawn in turn from *Marsilii Ficini Opera Omnia*, Basel, 1576, 1031. Curiously, Wind does not connect this vivid passage, dealing in such striking detail with the somewhat unusual (i.e., before that

Ficino's ecstatic statement may be generally related to the visual particulars of Michelangelo's *Bacchus* (figs. 1, 5) by again citing Condivi's evaluation of this work as representing an exalted, but mentally disencumbered, toper, one whose "aspect is merry; the eyes squinting and lascivious, like those of people excessively given to the love of wine . . . for Michelangelo desired to signify that he who allows his senses to be overwhelmed by the appetite for that fruit [the grape], and the liquor pressed from it [the wine], ultimately loses his life." Accordingly, Michelangelo's "merry" *Bacchus* may also be read to parallel literally Ficino's verbal picture of a transported figure, that is, one who is "*inexistimabili gaudio velut ebrie, ut ita dixerim, debacchantur*." Even in the carefully crafted details characterizing its strictly visual style, Michelangelo's merrily inebriated god seems to conform to Ficino's call for a "*stilo libero potius et iocoso*." As such, this *Bacchus* by Michelangelo likely provides a means by which we "might penetrate the mysteries of the [Christian] Prophets and the Apostles." In the case of Ficino, the larger philosophical implications of such extreme inebriation, at once joyful and raging, are, of course, unmistakable.

With further reference to this timely Christian application of what is essentially, and unquestionably Neoplatonic, "*Ebrietas nobile*," one must assume that both Ficino and Michelangelo were equally familiar with the standard scriptural commendation of wine as a means of alleviating human spirits, whether those are creative, pious, "noble," or otherwise. For instance, Proverbs 31:6–7 states: "Give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish, and wine unto those that be of heavy hearts. Let him drink, and forget his poverty, and remember his misery no more." The fact of an ubiquitous connection established in the Renaissance between wine and a welcome, essentially otherworldly, infusion of Christian "divine grace" was made wholly explicit by Cesare Ripa, the author of a standard artists' manual of allegorical figures.

In his *Iconologia* (first edition in 1593, with many subsequent reprintings) Ripa depicts Divine Grace (*Gratia Divina*) as a beautiful woman who clasps a cup full of wine in her left hand, which in itself

time) topic of the effects and causes of divine, even "noble," Intoxication, to its most immediately useful artistic application, meaning to what I would call the understood Neoplatonic content of Michelangelo's *Bacchus*. For more of Ficino's therapeutic references to wine, and so implicitly to Bacchus, see Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic*, 5, 13, 23, 30, 33, 36.

denotes, as Ripa puts it, "Grace, according to the Prophet, saying, 'he who drank from my chalice became enlightened'." More important is Ripa's observation that "whoever finds himself in God's grace will always be intoxicated by the sweetness of His love, for this kind of drunkenness is so lively and potent as to make one quite forget any thirst for worldly things and, without any unease, it renders perfect and complete satiation."¹⁹ There was really nothing new about any of this. Berchorius, for instance, had, and long before, connected Bacchic wine to "the Grace of God or the Fervor of the Holy Spirit." The communality throughout the Renaissance of this particular connection, the one explicitly drawn between the gift of Bacchus, wine, and the more overtly spiritual gifts promised in Christian Scripture, is made evident in some other texts.

Michelangelo's *Bacchus* was, as we may now additionally assume, understood from the outset by the Florentine *cognoscenti* to represent a work of "art." Moreover, as a contemporary *opus magnum*, and which was actually called "il Bacco moderno" by Lomazzo, it would have been so designated within the understood context of Praxiteles' lost, but still world-renowned, "Dionysus, or Father Freedom (as Noble Intoxication), with a Satyr," as so described by Pliny (and later pictured by Alciati: **fig. 6**). To this grouping probably there was grafted in a timely fashion a strictly creative-artistic application (as *ekphrasis*) of "Bacchic Frenzy," especially the kind so vividly described by Callistratus, and so uniquely applied by him to yet another specifically Dionysiac, *sculptural* creation. In this case, another historically important *topos* offers itself, namely, the argument for Michelangelo's timely contribution to contemporary polemics concerning the "Creative-Liberal Arts." Mention of this issue immediately leads us into a historical recreation of a complementary topic increasingly pertinent to Renaissance theoreticians, that is, "The Poet's Divine Frenzy," particularly as it once pertained to a "creative" or "intellectually stimulating," "intoxicating" or "inspired," and often explicitly Christian, *Bacchus*.

¹⁹ Ripa, *Iconologia*, 211: "Perche chi è in gratia di Dio, sempre sta ebrio delle dolcezze dello amore suo, percioche questa imbriachezza è sì gagliarda, & potente, che fa scordar la sete della cose mondane, & senza alcun disturbo dà perfetta, & comita satietà."

Bacchus in Ficino's Phaedrus

Ficino's decisive contribution to the modern evolution of the topos of "Creative-Artistic Madness" begins in the very first line of his "Commentary" on Plato's *Phaedrus* (first drafted ca. 1474; here quoted in the revised edition of 1492). It is here that Ficino calls upon the authority of "our Plato, pregnant with the madness of the poetic Muse." Next are rehearsed the ancient Socratic distinctions, that is, between human skill and "madness, by artistically employing some poetic ambiguities." Further divisions are observed by Ficino to exist between human and divine madness, and these are broken down into four parts (and so corresponding to *Phaedrus* 265 A-B). As listed by Ficino, these include: "prophecies, the mysteries, poetry, and love [*vaticinium, mysterium, poesim atque amorem*]." As it turns out, according to Ficino, "the wisdom imparted by divine madness [*divino furore*] is placed far in advance of [mere] human wisdom."²⁰ There is, for Ficino, a tidy historical explanation for the close association of "divinity" and "poetry": "The ancient poets did not compose divine hymns until, admonished by prophets and priests, they had first thought to celebrate the gods, to pray to them to intercede, and then to give thanks. . . . Through prophecy and priestly mysteries we know God as the good, and so we poets immediately worship divine things and sing of them poetically" (*Comm.*, IV, 1-2).

Then follows the literally "alienated"—or modern: "*aliené*," *avant la lettre*—clinical analysis of that madness particularly affecting poets:

Whomever is taken over by any kind of spiritual possession [*numine . . . occupatur*] is indeed overflowing on account of the vehemence of the divine impulse [*impulsus divini vehementiam*] and by the fullness of its power: he raves, exults, and exceeds the bounds of human behavior. Not unjustly, therefore, this possession or rapture is called "madness" and "alienation" [*occupatio hec sive raptus furor quidam et alienatio . . . nominatur*]. But no madman is content with simple speech: he instead bursts forth into clamoring and songs and poems. Any madness, therefore, whether derived from prophecies, the mysteries, or from erotic attraction, justly seems, when it proceeds to compose songs and poems, to be released as poetic madness [*in furorem poeticum videtur*] (*Comm.*, IV, 3-4).²¹

²⁰ Ficino, *Phaedran Charioteer*, 72-77.

²¹ Ficino, *Phaedran Charioteer*, 83-85. These kinds of "numinous" and "afflated" passages led Edgar Wind to ascribe (*Pagan Mysteries*, 232) a specifically Neoplatonic significance to Raphael's emblem of *Poesia*, inscribed "Numine afflatur," as placed

Put otherwise (or more simply), Ficino tells us that Art ("songs and poetry"), with this being the kind of "art" so often arising from the specifically Bacchic types of *mysteria*, expresses a "divine impulse," which is itself the essential condition of "raptuous transport." Then, the essentially positive result is "poetic madness," and, almost like an inevitable evolutionary effect, presently we have the current cliché of the condition of psychological "alienation" supposedly inherent to any so-designated "avant-garde" artist, and just as that "principle of creative alienation" has operated since the Romantic era (as discussed in Chapter 7).

Ficino directly introduces the figure of Dionysus into his annotation to *Phaedrus* 238 C, where Socrates observes suddenly how: "I am inspired . . . as my speech goes on, the Nymphs take possession of me. In fact, what I am uttering now is almost lyrical." As cleverly explained by Ficino (with no real assistance from Plato),

Dionysus is the leader [*prefectus*, that is, of the Nymphs]; for he is the god who presides over both generation and regeneration. Thus, perhaps he is supposed twice-born [*bis natus*]. The hymns proper to him are dithyrambs, for they are inspired, obscure, and complex. But since both the soul, on the one hand, and desire, on the other, are also spiritually inspired [*afflatur numinibus*] by one or another of these divinities, Socrates is enraptured by Dionysus and the Nymphs. . . . Here in Plato's dialogue Socrates is entirely divinely inspired [*solum divinitus concitatur*] when he speaks of love and beauty; for he is personally more drawn to these, and visible beauty recalls invisible beauty to mind, the love of which raptuously marries us to God [*copulat nos cum Deo*]. Here Socrates started out inspired by the more peaceful divinities, the Muses, but he ended up surrendering to the frenzies of Dionysus [*desiivit in bacchanalia*].²²

Thus, according to Ficino's properly inspired reading of Plato's *Phaedrus*, Bacchus is (again) shown to be the often raptuously inspiring patron of both Poetry and Beauty in general. In the larger sense, through "divine inspiration," God and Art become intimately "coupled," an amorous action revealing a clear reference to *hierogamia*, or "sacred marriage." Most likely, this "hierogamic" concept was alluded

on the ceiling of the Stanza della Segnatura. Another likely specific source for Raphael was, however, in Virgil (*Aeneid*, VI, 50), where the phrase *adflata est numine* expressed the divine madness of the Sibyl seized by the agonized presence of her god. But for Raphael to have read Virgil in this manner, I think he would have had to know Ficino first—and intimately.

²² Ficino, *Phaedran Charioteer*, 134–37; but see Plato, *Phaedrus*, 37–38, for the particular Platonic passage (*Phaedrus* 238 C) "inspiring" Ficino's interpretation.

to in Michelangelo's *Rape of Hippodame* (fig. 2). Similarly, it seems also only logical to suppose that such a metaphorical "coupling" would have represented a typical contemporary mental reaction—an interpretation linking "divinely inspired" art expressed by "visible beauty" to "spiritual inspiration"—likely to have been conceived by a Florentine humanist standing before Michelangelo's *Bacchus* in 1497 (fig. 1).

Such explicit Bacchic connections seem to have been commonplace among the Florentine *cognoscenti*. In fact, one of those linkages was actually applied by Ficino to none other than Lorenzo de' Medici, Michelangelo's devoted patron. In a letter (ca. 1493) sent to Pietro Dovizzi da Bibbiena, Ficino described the literary evolution of Lorenzo the Magnificent as representing a four-stage succession of "poetic inspiration." First came the composition of amorous poetry in his youth, and next there came prophesy (*vaticinium*) in his maturity, and this Lorenzo wisely employed to foresee political events. Eventually, he was blessed with truly "Dionysiac inspiration." Particularly, this boon came upon him during his frequent stays in the Tuscan countryside, at his Villa Careggi, when he could be seen composing poetry in a state of "magnificent and contagious ardor." This Medician condition was then explicitly labeled a "Dionysiac drunkenness," also an "*excessum mentis*," and, so it was said, this gifted state, the fourth stage, eventually allowed him to penetrate the usually hidden "secrets of nature."²³

A similar Bacchic emphasis was introduced by Ficino in the case of *Phaedrus* 241 D, where—originally—Socrates had observed himself becoming "not merely lyrical, but actually lyrical," and the immediate cause was identified as being "these [Dionysiac] Nymphs, whose influence will drive me positively beside myself." However, according to Ficino's interpretation,

Socrates has been [specifically] inspired by Bacchus [*afflatus est Baccho*], mainly to dithyrambs, [and] by the Nymphs to songs. . . . Since Socrates has become ecstatic through Bacchus [*per Bacchum fit excessus*], perhaps the Apollonian demon immediately enraptures him here, for Apollo is closest to Bacchus, with the result that he even exceeds the bounds of human behavior, and thereafter [in *Phaedrus* 244 A ff.] Socrates treats of the divine love that excites us through some frenzy [*per fuorem . . . excitante*].²⁴

²³ Ficino's letter as paraphrased in Chastel, *Ficin et l'art*, 144.

²⁴ Ficino, *Phaedran Charioteer*, 138–39; but see Plato, *Phaedrus*, 42, for the Platonic passage (*Phaedrus* 241 D) "inspiring" this other interpretation by Ficino.

Although Michelangelo's discourses on love are unfortunately now lost to us, we do have it on Condivi's authority (but mainly as he heard it from others) that Michelangelo's terminology was taken directly from Plato.²⁵ In line with what we do actually know about Michelangelo's pursuit of Beauty and Love, we have the matter of Ficino's important observation ("Commentary," Cap. XXVI, as derived from *Phaedrus* 249 C) discussing "How the Contemplator Becomes Divine and Emerges as the Lover of Divine Beauty." In this case, what Plato actually said (*Phaedrus* 249 C) was that "truth" can only be perceived through knowledge of Universal Forms, and that desideratum must be "collected out of the multiplicity of sense-impressions," whence one achieves "a unity arrived at by a process of reason." In short, and according to Plato,

It is only by the right use of such aids to recollection, which form a continual initiation into the perfect mystic vision, that a man can become perfect in the true sense of the word. Because he then [uniquely] stands apart from the common objects of human ambition, and so applies himself to the divine, he is reproached by most men for being out of his wits [or insane]. They do not realize that he is, in fact, possessed by a [again un-named] god.²⁶

For Ficino, in spite of what Plato-Socrates actually might have said, the end result becomes wholly, decisively "Dionysiac." According to Ficino,

In examining the reasons for all things, the legitimate philosopher repeatedly conceives common notions in himself from the common natures he perceives in individual things. Through these common notions, he comes to perceive the formulas implanted in himself, and, through them, he finally attains the Ideas. Through these Ideas, he intellectually discovers divine wisdom and goodness. Making correct use of these meditations, he wholly venerates and worships divine wisdom and goodness, just as soon as he discovers them. Hence, he becomes himself full with divinity [*hinc divinitate prorsus impletur*]. Like a priest, for he [the Philosopher-Poet] is himself a Theologian, he is then said to have been purified to the utmost, for he is carried off by the Mysteries, that is, by Dionysiac frenzy [*ad summum dicitur expiatus mysterialique et dionysiaco furore correptus*].²⁷

The important conclusion reached here is that this newly coined kind of Renaissance-Christian, Philosopher-Poet, "full with divinity,"

²⁵ Condivi, *Vita*, 98–99.

²⁶ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 55–56 (249 C).

²⁷ Ficino, *Phaedran Charioteer*, 175.

is “like a priest,” is “purified,” and so he becomes creatively “transported,” and specifically by means of “Bacchic madness.” As we shall soon see, the very same idea resurfaces exactly five-hundred years later, when Symbolist art theorists in France collectively imagine themselves to be coining a novel idea, what I dub (in chapter 9) a modernist archetype, the “Artist-Priest-Prophet.”

Bacchus in Ficino's Symposium

Unquestionably, Ficino's most influential treatise, in this case meaning for the Renaissance as a whole, was his *Commentarium in Convivium Platonis de Amore*, which he composed 1469, with revisions added in 1474/5. This work is credited with being the *locus classicus* for nearly all subsequent Renaissance discussions bearing upon the ubiquitous theme of “Platonic Love.” The contributions of Ficino's *Commentary on Plato's Symposium* to, for instance, the English literary Renaissance have been long since recognized.²⁸ Ficino's *Commentary on Plato's Symposium* has also been accepted, and for some time, as having contributed in a significant way to the formation of Michelangelo's early thought. David Summers observes how, among all the notable works by this Florentine Neoplatonist, Michelangelo “seems to have been [most] familiar with Marsilio Ficino's commentary on Plato's *Symposium*.”²⁹ Given the most likely, meaning equally contemporary and Florentine, contexts for Michelangelo's *Bacchus* (**fig. 1**), we may now suppose the artist to have been similarly familiar with Ficino's Bacchic observations as published in the *Phaedrus Commentary* of 1496.

Ficino had, however, already introduced Dionysiac materials into his exegesis on Plato's *Symposium*, where at the very end of the *Convivium* he introduces Bacchus by explaining “By What Steps Divine Madness Elevates the Soul.” As in his later *Commentary on Phaedrus*, Ficino begins by defining those “*quattuor divini furoris*”: “The first is Poetic Madness; the second madness is that belonging to the Mysteries; the third is that of Prophecy; and the fourth is that of Love; additionally, Poetry arises from the Muses; the Mysteries are attributed

²⁸ Since this is a peripheral point, and since the scholarship dealing with this issue is extensive, I need only cite one of the earliest studies: Harrison, *Platonism in English Poetry*, 1903—and much more, of course, has since followed.

²⁹ Summers, *Language of Art*, 9.

to Dionysus; Prophecy [is ascribed] to Apollo; and Love to Venus.” The sense of the whole scheme, showing Bacchus to be a kind of spiritual remedy for mankind, is explained by Ficino as follows:

The whole soul is filled with discord and dissonance; therefore the first need is for poetic madness [*poetico ergo furore primum opus est*], which arouses what is sleeping [the Intellect] through musical tones; calms what is in turmoil through harmonic sweetness, and, finally, quells dissonant discord and tempers the various parts of the soul through the blending of different things. But that is still not sufficient, for [unhealthy] multiplicity and diversity yet remain in the soul. Therefore, there is to be added the Mystery of Dionysus, which sacrifices by expiation and so directs the attention of all parts to the Mind by means of every form of divine worship; by these means God is worshipped. Accordingly, since the single parts of the soul have now become reorganized into one Mind, the soul is now made into a single [healthy] entity from [formerly unhealthy] diverse parts.³⁰

According to Ficino, because the human mind is inherently “discordant,” it actually requires a unifying “poetic madness” which serves as a “calming,” or therapeutic, medium, and just as that was found in the Dionysiac Mysteries. Perhaps this passage was later recalled by Michelangelo in a different artistic context and medium. For instance, some features of Ficino’s explanation of the integrative benefits of Poetic Fury, particularly its musical motifs, seem to appear in a much discussed drawing called the “Dream of Michelangelo.”³¹ (**fig. 13**) In short, both Ficino’s text and Michelangelo’s drawing expound upon a sleeping soul, the Intellect, which has been opportunely aroused by music, evidently represented in the drawing by a trumpeter-angel, with the whole ensemble also (narrowly) representing “Beauty,” according to Vincenzo Danti, or (more broadly) “Love of God,” according to this statement by Ficino. Following the latter, then the masks and tortured nudes in Michelangelo’s drawing likely represent

³⁰ Ficino, *Commentary on Plato’s Symposium*, 115–16; Oratio Septima, cap. XIV, “Quibus Gradibus Divini Furores Animam Extollunt” (an Italian translation appeared later: *Sopra lo amore o vero Convito di Platone*, Florence, 1549). Although this is a point peripheral to our main argument, it may be remarked that, throughout his *Commentary on Plato’s Symposium*, Ficino refuses to involve himself with the homosexual issues originally celebrated in Plato’s *Symposium* (esp. 192 A ff.).

³¹ For so-called “Sogno di Michelangelo,” principally see Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, xii–xiii, 212–18; Ruvoldt, “Michelangelo’s Dream” (but not quoting Ficino’s texts); Summers, *Language of Art*, 215–16; see also Gandolfo, *Il Dolce Tempo*, 138–51. See also Clark, *The Nude*, 396–99, suggesting that in Michelangelo’s contemporaneous drawings of the *Resurrection*, the ecstatic poses were adapted from “those of the old Dionysiac dancers,” or Maenad-Bacchantes.

the “discords and dissonances, multiplicity and diversities, filling the whole soul.” “Poetic Madness,” however, “calms what is in turmoil through harmonic sweetness,” so represented by Michelangelo’s trumpeting angel, he who sweetly harmonizes “the single parts of the soul . . . into one Mind,” and as implicitly guided by the example of the “Mystery of Dionysus, which sacrifices by expiation.”

Titian’s Bacchanal of the Andrians

To illustrate further, and in a concrete fashion, the positive value placed by the Renaissance upon Dionysus’s generous gift to mortals—wine—we may quickly examine the humanist contexts informing Titian’s famous painting of the *Bacchanal of the Andrians* (1518–19). (**fig. 7**) The scene is set on Andros, which is the island sacred to Dionysus, and where he performed a miracle each year; in his presence, the water of a fountain was then transformed into wine. A commissioned work, this canvas adorned the “Studio” of Alfonso d’Este in his ducal Castle at Ferrara. A much celebrated masterpiece, it was later copied by Rubens and Poussin, among others. With specific reference to this painting, Fritz Saxl stated that, according to Titian’s interpretation, the physical manifestation of Dionysus:

on earth is *wine*, which transforms man’s soul, so that he forgets his sorrows—wine, which confounds the thoughts or makes thoughts doubly clear. Wine has the power to make man foresee the future. It makes men talk in verse. All these miracles are not the miracles of a primeval age—they are repeated time and again, for all to witness. Dionysus has therefore become the special god of miraculous transformation. . . . He is the god who dies and rises again, as the vine dies in winter and comes to life again in the spring. I have only to remind you of the words: “I am the true vine” [John 15:1] to indicate what an important role the symbolism of the vine plays in Christian thought.³²

As scholars have long recognized, Titian’s painting is an *ekphrasis*. Specifically, its source is Philostratus. Aldus Manutius, the pioneering Venetian printer, first published the Greek text in 1503, and all the educated classes, including some painters, then took the keenest interest in his descriptions of the lost art works of Antiquity. Demetrios

³² Saxl, “A Humanist Dreamland,” as reprinted in his *Heritage of Images*, 89–104 (p. 89).

Moschos, a Greek emigrant scholar, made an Italian translation of Philostratus around 1510 for Isabella d'Este, Duchess of Mantua, and she lent the book in 1516 to her brother, the Duke of Ferrara. The specific passage (*Imagines* I, 25) providing Titian's mise-en-scène reads as follows:

The stream of wine which is on the island of Andros, and the Andrians who have become drunken from the river, are the subject of this painting. For, by an act of Dionysus, the earth of the Andrians is so charged with wine that it bursts forth, and it sends up for them a river . . . The men, crowned with ivy and bryony, are [shown] singing to their wives and children; some are dancing on either bank, some reclining. And, very likely, this also is the theme of their song: that this river [of wine] makes men rich, and powerful in the assembly, and helpful to their friends, and beautiful and, instead of short, four cubits tall; for when a man has drunk his fill of it [the river of wine] he can assemble all these qualities and, in his thoughts, he can make them his own. They sing, I feel sure, that this river [of wine] alone is not disturbed by the feet of cattle or of horses, but is a [vinous] draught drawn from Dionysus, and is drunk unpolluted, flowing for men alone. This is what you should imagine you hear, and what some of them really are singing, even though their voices are thick with wine.

Consider, however, what is to be seen in the painting [so carefully recreated by Titian]: The river lies on a couch of grape-clusters; pouring out its stream, it is a river undiluted and of agitated appearance; *thyrsi* grow about it like reeds about bodies of water, and if one goes along past the land and these drinking groups on it, he comes at length on Tritons at the river's mouth, who are scooping up the wine in sea-shells. Some of it they drink, some they blow out in streams and, among the Tritons, some are drunken and dancing. Dionysus also sails to the revels of Andros and, his ship now moored in the harbor, he leads a mixed throng of Satyrs and Bacchantes and all the Sileni. He leads Laughter and Revel, two spirits most gay and most fond of drinking bout, that with the greatest delight he may reap the river's harvest.³³

In Titian's canvas, and just as he was described by Philostratus, the river-god is shown in the middle distance reclining upon a couch of grape clusters and surrounded by trees with vines. Also faithful to the text of the *Imagines*, one sees a crowd of "men, crowned with ivy and bryony, singing to their wives and children, some dancing on either bank, some reclining." Titian, however, has been selective in his use of the source text. Whereas Dionysus's moored ship may be discerned

³³ Philostratus, as in *ibid.*, 90–91. For another version of the same text, see Philostratus, *Imagines* (ed. Fairbanks), I, 25, "Andrioi—Andrians," pp. 96–99 (bi-lingual).

in the background, the god himself is not directly represented. Titian has also omitted the drunken and cavorting Tritons; neither are there any Satyrs, Bacchantes, or Sileni shown. The blissful people depicted by Titian are mere mortals, the likes of you or I. The universality of Dionysus's gift is characterized by two plebeian women in the foreground, both of whom hold flutes. Before them is placed a sheet of music with the text of a contemporary French song: "*Qui boit et ne reboit ne sait que boire soit*"—"whoever drinks, but does not drink again, knows not what drinking is." The girl on the right heeds the admonition of the popular ditty and accepts a flagon of wine poured for her by a sun-burnt, naked man. In the foreground a gorgeous blond nude drowsily arches her back in Dionysian reverie, even *ecstasy*. As Saxl characterized the picture overall, truly this uninhibited Bacchic revel represents "A Humanist Dreamland."

CHAPTER SIX

THE EMBLEMATIC BACCHUS AND “INSPIRED” ART-MAKING

Bacchus in Renaissance Mythography and Emblematics

After the initial appearance, and further circulation, of Ficino’s authoritative statements, one encounters much evidence for a direct association commonly drawn in the Renaissance between Dionysus’s wine and a timely remedy for human cares. In some cases, writers even directly allude to an identification of Bacchus with the generation of useful artifacts produced by the human intellect, specifically the poetic, even artistic, kinds. These statements I take to represent ideas already current at the time Michelangelo conceived his *Bacchus* (**fig. 1**). A case in point are the widely consulted mythographies compiled by sixteenth-century scholars.

The earliest of these Renaissance mythographers was Lillio Gregorio Giraldi (1479–1552), a native of Ferrara.¹ In his *Di musis Syntagma* (1514), Giraldi advanced a curious astrological interpretation of Bacchus in relation to the Muses who “inspire” artistic production. Besides that, Giraldi was firm in his opinion that, rather than standing for the licentious life, Bacchus was really the “God of Liberation.” He states that, “the first power in the World-Soul belongs to Bacchus the Thunderer.” Thus, “Bacchus, like the Muses, we understand to confer knowledge of divine powers by means of his intoxicating nectars.”² Another important, and much more widely consulted, mythographer was Natale Conti (Comes), who provided an exhaustive, scholarly documentation in his *Mythologiae* (1551) for a plethora of legends dealing with the God of Wine, also directly quoting numerous Bacchic citations appearing in ancient literature. Besides those,

¹ For Giraldi’s priority (previously disputed) in these matters, see Sez nec, *Survival of the Pagan Gods*, 233, noting that it was he who “undoubtedly influenced” those who followed, most notably Conti and Cartari (both as quoted here).

² “. . . quod ideo singulis Musis singula Bacchi cognomina conferuntur, ut Musarum vires divinae cognitionis nectare ebrias intelligamus,” etc.; Giraldi, as quoted in Battisti, *Renacimiento y Barroco*, 104, n. 36.

Conti also includes the essentially Scriptural interpretation of the divine gift of wine. As he stated, among “all other kinds of inventions given to the human race by Bacchus,” there are those providing a welcome means of therapeutic forgetfulness, so alleviating the toils and troubles of earthly life by “liberating” men from most mundane afflictions, that is, if taken in moderation. For Conti, Bacchus is also *Liber pater*, a “Father Freedom.”³

A similar line of positive Bacchic interpretation appears a bit later in Vincenzo Cartari’s widely consulted *Le Immagini dei Dei degli Antichi* (1556). This author (citing both Servius and Boccaccio) notes how the rites of Bacchus primarily serve “to purge the soul”—*alla purgatione degli animi*. For this kind of ritual purification, drunkenness is essential, and this purgative intoxication—“*ubbriachezza*”—represents, in fact, something like the Eucharist of Bacchic rites: “This purification was wrought in men through intoxication, for this represents the Bacchic sacrament”—*è il sacramento di Baccho*. This intoxicating, but cleansing, process leads positively and directly to a kind of tranquility of the soul discussed by Seneca. It was he who had also claimed, Cartari recalls, that “by tidying up the brain, stripping away all noxious thoughts, and by leaving it cheery and tranquil—so says Seneca—it makes it appear that the soul forgets all its fatigues.” And, once again, for this reason Bacchus is to be thought of as “Father Freedom”—*Baccho fu chiamato Libero Padre*. With this honorific title, he makes men “liberated” of their most vexious notions and worries: “Bacchus was called Father Freedom because when a man drinks copiously he thereby frees himself from all troublesome thoughts, likewise speaking more freely than when he is sober.” For authors like Cartari, Bacchus is even very explicitly called the God of Liberty: “There were also some other writers who would simply call him ‘Liberty’—*la Libertà*—of which they believed him the [tutelary] god.”⁴

Alciati’s popular emblem-book, and as we have already seen (see **fig. 6**), had presented another example of various newly installed,

³ Conti, *Mythologiae*, fols. 150v, 155r: “In Bacchus omnium prope eorum quae humano generi inventa fuerunt, utilissimum vinum putavit, cum oblivionem omnium malorum, & somni autorem, & tristitiae solatium Bacchum invenisse dicat . . . quia bonus deus Dionysius illud invenisset, vel quia cum moderatione sumptus utilis fit & bonus potus. . . . Atque multa fuerunt Bacchi cognomina ut . . . Liber pater aut Lyaeus, quod idem est, quia vinum liberius haustum a curis liberet.”

⁴ Cartari, *Le Immagini*, 423, 425.

generally wholly positive, meanings attached to Bacchus. And yet another aspect is represented by Alciati's twenty-third emblem, "*Vino Prudentiam Augeri*," which pictured a new, intimate pairing now commonly accepted to exist between Bacchus and Athena Minerva. (Fig. 14) It is explicitly stated that their conjunction serves to marry together the God of Wine (and Inspiration) and the legendary Inventor of the Arts and Sciences. Alciati's Latin motto tells us that, besides stimulating wit and the intellect in general, "Wine Augments Prudence." Both gods, one male and the other female, co-exist within the same classically appointed Temple, where both stand together upon a elaborately carved altar, to which offerings may be mutually brought to them by their grateful benefactors. The verses placed below the *imago* explain that,

*Haec Bacchus pater et Pallas communiter ambo
Templa tenent, soboles utraque vera Iovis.
Haec caput, ille femur solvit: huic usus olivi
Debitus, invenit primus at ille merum.
unguntur merito, quod si qui abstemius odit
Vina, Deae nullum sentiet auxilium.*

(Father Bacchus and Athena together share this temple, and both are the true offspring of Jupiter. She came out of Jupiter's head; he arose from his thigh. To her [Minerva] is due the use of the olive, but he [Dionysus] first discovered fortified wine. Rightly are they conjoined; for if an abstemious man hates wine [and Bacchus], he will experience no aid whatsoever from the Goddess [of the Arts and Sciences]).

Another emblematic illustrator of Bacchus was Hadrianus Junius (Adriaen de Jongh), the author of an emblem-book published in Antwerp in 1565 and simply called *Emblemata*. Under the title "*Vinum ingenii fomes*" (Wine is the kindling of the mind), Junius's commentary draws for us a verbal picture of the God of Wine that looks strikingly like Michelangelo's *Bacchus* (**fig. 1**). After stating that the figure of a youthful Bacchus is meant in the wholly positive sense, that is, "to signify that wine taken in moderation lessens the care of sadness and renders the intellect agile and joyful" [*Vinum, si modus adsit, ut tristitiae curam hebetare; ita ingenium agile reddere & alacre*], Junius quickly describes him as follows:

Bacchus is portrayed as a naked boy; beardless, of ruddy complexion and a joyful countenance; his brow is girdled with grape leaves and [like Moses, Bacchus has] little horns sprouting from his forehead. His body

is not fat like a water pot, but sprightly and agile, and he has a bird's wings projecting from his shoulders. He holds a bunch of grapes in one hand and, in the other, if you wish, a drinking cup; with lively eyes, he is shown gazing up to heaven.⁵

Other than the wings, the rest of the details belonging to Junius's verbal description match the appearance of Michelangelo's sculpture (**fig. 1**).

As students of emblematics well know, Alciati's initial meanings were soon to be considerably amplified in strictly verbal form by a host of eager scholars and exegetes. Alciati's commentators always initially ground their interpretive embroideries upon the same standard classical-period texts as those manipulated by Quattrocento humanists. Accordingly, their statements, although composed after the execution of Michelangelo's *Bacchus*, may be taken to express ideological values similar to those generally pertaining to the time and place that culturally shaped Michelangelo's sculpture.

One of the more influential of the emblematic commentators was Claude Mignault (or "Minos"). His analysis of Alciati's Emblem XXIII (as published in his *Emblemata cum explicatione*, 1591) informed readers that the fundamental source for the Latin epigram—"Wine Augments Prudence"—was the ancient *Greek Anthology*. Mignault also remarks upon the conjoined figures exhibited upon the altar (**fig. 14**), stating that the idea represented by this motif is that Prudence advises that use of wine be approached in moderation. So employed, wine was not feared in olden times, when it was recognized to lead to a useful "fecundity of inventions." As for *Bacchus pater*, he is said to be a "nourishing, kind, propitious, and bountiful God," whose gifts, taken prudently, "nourish and restore" his devotees.⁶ In reference to Alciati's other Bacchic emblem (**fig. 6**), we again hear Mignault's counsels about the necessity for moderation and prudence in the

⁵ Junius, as given in Screech, "The Winged Bacchus," 261 n. 4: "Pingantur Bacchum puer, nudus, imberbis, rubidi coloris, laeto vultu, pampinis redimitus, corniculis ex fronte promicantibus, corpore non obeso aqualiculi instar, sed vegeto & agili, alis extra humeros exstantibus volucer, altera manu botrum tenens; altera, si placet, scyphum: oculis vivacibus, & caelum suspectantibus." For a reproduction of this emblem, see Henkel and Schöne, *Emblemata: Handbuch zur Sinnbildkunst des XVI. und XVII. Jahrhunderts*, col. 1827.

⁶ Mignault, *Emblemata Andreae Alciati*, 271 (I am quoting from a somewhat blurred microfiche copy in my possession).

employment of wine. His overall conclusion here also holds that "the wise man is one who knows how to take wine temperately."⁷

Perhaps more important is an implicit art-historical reference; Mignault also recognizes that the reference given to Praxiteles's "renowned" statue in Alciati's Emblem XXV, "*In statuum Bacchi*," was a commonplace (see **fig. 6**). More specifically, Mignault stated that Alciati's reference had, in fact, been drawn from Book 34 in Pliny's *Natural History* (and here Mignault seems ignorant of Callistrates's complementary, but less well known, description of another Dionysiac sculpture by Skopas: **fig. 4**). By explicitly citing this textual *locus classicus*, Mignault further supports a previous conclusion, namely, that during the Renaissance Pliny was indeed the primary textual *ekphrasis* for knowledge of Praxiteles' "world-famous" *Bacchus with a Satyr*, which was itself a proto-emblematic sculptural ensemble (**fig. 6**) which the Roman encyclopedist had also affirmed to have collectively represented "Father Freedom, or Noble Intoxication"—"*Liber Pater, [sive] Ebrietas nobile, et satyrus*."⁸

The most thorough of all the Renaissance commentators on the often elusive meanings of Alciati's emblems was Johann Thuilus, who frequently acknowledges his debt to the preceding scholarship of Claude Mignault. In his exhaustive and massive examination of the diverse literary traditions supporting Alciati's pictorial-poetic enigmas, *Andreae Alciati Emblemata cum commentariis* (1621), Thuilus, as a pioneering German philologist, actually far surpasses the example of his bookish predecessors. For example, he had much more to say than they did about the quintessential Bacchic Emblem 23, *Vino Prudentiam Augeri* (**fig. 14**).⁹ What he writes here neatly embraces nearly all of the Dionysiac themes we have already examined, and in the way they had been circulating much earlier in various contexts, and as drawing upon disparate sources.

At the outset, Thuilus announces that the two gods, Bacchus and Minerva, should be shown together because, since time immemorial, they have been taken to represent, equally, "Poetry as much as Philosophy" (*Poeticam aequat Philosophiae*). Those poets most praised,

⁷ Mignault, *Emblemata*, 272–74.

⁸ For this reading of Pliny, see again ch. 3, n. 24.

⁹ Thuilus, *Alciati Emblemata*, 129–38; for Alciati's Emblem 25 (our fig. 6), see also 138–51, essentially an expanded version of Mignault's commentary, as partially cited above.

says Thuilius, are those who generously partake of Philosophy. Accordingly, it is only right that Bacchus should be “married” to Minerva, because, among other reasons (including their uniquely shared trait of virgin birth), both are foremost among the historical “inventors”—in this case, of the olive and the vine.¹⁰

In this manner, Bacchus becomes directly associated with (or “married to”) the invention of the Arts. By clear implication at this date, Bacchus is conjoined with those arts which are specifically Liberal, because, states Thuilius, “Minerva was believed the inventor of all the arts.” The overall purpose of Alciati’s quintessential “Inspired Bacchic Emblem” (**fig. 14**), Thuilius emphasizes, is to commend the moderate use of wine and its positive effects. Prudently employed, wine is, therefore, implicitly deemed essential to “the invention of all the arts,” particularly that Art of Poetry which equally partakes of Philosophy—“*Poeticam aequat Philosophiae*.”

So, according to Thuilius, this emblem particularly celebrates Bacchus, that “God who, without any doubt, introduced this singular benefit, the planting of the vine, to the human species.” As a Christian, this meticulous commentator additionally feels constrained to note another argument. On the authority of the Book of Genesis, states Thuilius, and because of his notorious drunkenness, “it was Noah who, after the Flood, was the first inventor of an offense,” that is, against the initially Bacchic, and for him wholly positive, gift of the intoxicating nectar.¹¹ Citing Gellius’s axiom that “wine sharpens the intellect” (*Vinum acuit ingenium*), Thuilius points out that the picture of an *agalma* (cult-statue) “of Bacchus and Pallas, both standing upon an altar [**fig. 14**], signifies that Prudence is increased if Bacchus, that is, undiluted wine, is moderated, and in that condition its use is to be recommended.” In that case, “wine fertilizes and so allows for invention,” according to, for instance, Plutarch.¹²

¹⁰ Thuillius, *Alciati Emblemata*, 130: “Quod dictum ad summam Poeticae laudem, quae iisdem honoribus ac Philosophia donanda videatur: Hic ergo non immerito simul jungantur Bacchus & Minerva, ambo eadem parte nati, sine matre ambo; bellatores ambo; ambo duarum preclarissimarum rerum, olei & vini.”

¹¹ Thuillius, *Alciati Emblemata*, 132.

¹² Thuillius, *Alciati Emblemata*, 133: “αγαλμα [agalma, uti in Callistratus] proponit Bacchi, & Palladis, eodem altari erectis, ut nimirum significetur prudentiae incrementum esse aliquod, si Bacchi, id est, vini generosi, sed moderati, usus accesserit . . . vino facundiam et inventionem tribuit.” For Plutarch, himself evidently an initiate, referring to Dionysus as the god of liberated emotions and ecstatic forms of worship

Another common leit-motif in Thuilius's extended commentary is one we have already encountered in other authors, namely that Bacchus, through his great gift of wine, provides a remedy (*remedium*) against the cares and tedium which afflict and trouble the human soul. To this end, Thuilius specifically cites one of the *carmina* of Horace, "Oh faithful jar" (*O nata mecum, Odes*, III, 21):

You [wine] apply a gentle compulsion to wits
That are otherwise dull; you and jesting
Bacchus uncover wise men's
Preoccupations and secret counsels;
You bring back hope to despairing minds;
Add spirit and strength to the poor,
Who after you tremble neither at the crowns
Of angry kings nor at the soldiery's weapons.¹³

Next, Horace's well-known classical celebration of "wise" Bacchic Intoxication is immediately "Christianized," that is, inserted into an appropriate scriptural context, by Thuilius: "*Quo pertinet etiam illud Sapientis Proverb. 31: Date siceram moerentibus,*" etc., and then he quotes the rest of the pertinent passage from Proverbs 31:6 ff. ("Give strong drink . . .").¹⁴ Now, having rendered for us a tipsy Bacchus thoroughly Christianized and moralized, the rest of Thuilius' interpretive commentary rehearses familiar arguments. These are the ones dealing positively with Bacchus' wonderful gift to mankind, the kind holding that wine that "sharpens native wit, liberates both heart and mind and, as it were, breaks open the prison and spurs on that steed of the poet." That last poetic equine motif represents a subtle yoking (and just as Ficino might have put it) of "Mad Poetic Creation" to the metaphor of the allegorical Charioteer, the one reining in the "Passions of the Soul," and such as he was made famous by Plato (in *Phaedrus* 246 B ff.). To this effect, Thuilius then quotes a famous proverb, "There'll be no Bacchic verses if only water is to be drunk." Thuilius concludes by citing, he says, Solomon: "While moderate

and inspiration, see Plutarch, *Essays*, 77, 83, 160, 196, 288, 373; see also Plutarch, *Selected Essays*, 29 (re "enthusiasm": "one who is filled with spirit [*pneuma*] is called inspirited [*emphnoui*]," etc.).

¹³ Thuillius, *Alciati Emblemata*, 133, cited (naturally) in Latin by Thuilius; the English translation (and Latin verse) is as given in Horace, *Complete Odes*, 153; for a useful listing of all the wine/Bacchus references in Horace, see McKinley, "The Wine Element in Horace."

¹⁴ Thuillius, *Alciati Emblemata*, 133.

consumption of wine exalts heart and soul and leads to creation, drunkenness certainly does not, for that condition only cheats you out of life itself.”¹⁵

“Inspiration” in the Rise of “God-like” Artistic Creation

As we have just witnessed, it was in the Renaissance when the decisive formulation of a peculiarly “Bacchic” kind of “maddened,” creative inspiration initially occurred. A complementary Dionysian contribution was a specification for the priest-like role of the “divine” poet. Both ideas established themselves as established *topoi*, or conventional rhetorical tropes. And, since the Renaissance, notions about the artist functioning as a kind of mindless vehicle of “divine” infusion, as the passive instrument of the “*furori poetici*,” were to become standard propositions. Not surprisingly, these inspirational commonplaces, particularly the literally “maddening” sort, were to be endlessly repeated, and right up to modern times, by devoted supporters of the poetic art.¹⁶

A bibliography of the more important later Renaissance publications celebrating at great length such irrational, and specifically “enthusiastic,” poetic effects might include the following, self-explanatory, titles: Francesco Patrizi, *Discorso della diversità de’ furori poetici* (1553: “A Discourse on the Variety of Poetic Madnesses”); L. G. Tabalducci, *Discorso del furor poetico* (1575: “A Discourse on Poetic Madness”); Girolamo Frachetta, *Dialogo del furor poetico* (1581: “A Dialogue on Poetic Madness”); Fausto Summo, *Discorsi poetici* (1609:

¹⁵ Thuillius, *Alciati Emblemata*, 134: “Exultatio anima et cordis vinum moderatam sumptum; ad incunditatem enim creatum est, non ad ebrietatem, qua te vita defraudet.” Rather than from “Solomon,” this last citation actually seems to stem, with considerable embellishments, from Psalms 104:15: “And wine that maketh glad the heart of man . . .” As for the historical, literary-artistic context (with abundant citations) of the proverb cited by Thuillius, “Non est Dithyrambus, si bibat aquam,” see Crowther, “Water and Wine as Symbols of Inspiration”; Knox, “Wine, Water, and Callimachaeon Aesthetics.”

¹⁶ For various examples of such ideas in humanist literary theory of the Renaissance, see Baker, “Certain Religious Elements in the English Doctrine of the Inspired Poet during the Renaissance”; Heninger, *Sidney and Spenser*, s. v. “Enthusiasm,” “Mousike”; for the development in Germany of the (borrowed) Renaissance concept labelling the poet “divinely inspired,” see Steppich, “Die Vorstellung vom göttlich inspirierten Dichter in der humanistischen Dichtungstheorie.”

"Poetic Discourses"); Agostino Mascardi, *Prose volgare* (1630: "Vernacular Prose"); Pierre Petit, *De furore poetico* (1683: "Concerning Poetic Madness"), etc.¹⁷ Even when the topic of "furious poetic madness" is not made explicit in the book title, the notion of an essentially crazed kind of artistic "inspiration" is made clear in the authors' discourses, also in countless other texts. Citation of a couple of representative documents will suffice to make this point.

Andrea Menechini's oration *Delle lodi della poesia, d'Omero, et di Virgilio* (1572: "Concerning the Accolades of Poetry by Homer and Virgil") may serve admirably as an example of the omnipresent Platonic attitude toward the means of poetry, particularly the shopworn arguments for the "maddening" sources of its "inspiration." In his praise of poetry, Menechini cites Plato frequently, particularly in regards to the inspired poet's "divine furor" and, especially, with reference to the prophetic gift of the poets. The Italian theoretician emphasizes the superiority of verse over prose in its harmony, and especially in its persuasive power, and in its imitative capacity. Echoing one of the central concepts of the Platonists, Menechini argues that "imitation" itself constitutes the major effectiveness of poetry. According to Menechini, poetry "excites the movements of our souls, takes possession of our minds, frightening us with examples of monstrous things and delighting us with the image of those things which we desire with every warmth of passion." It is through this capacity to "possess" the souls of its listeners that poetry achieves its advantage; in this way, it works miracles, it arouses men to the contemplation of the universal, and thus it frees them from the singular and the particular. Hence, poetry becomes the mistress of all the sciences. These various powers are the consequences, even constitute the proof of the divinity of poetry. In sum, "The divinity of poetry is understood from this fact, that nobody can achieve success in it without celestial breath or *inspiration*." From the poet, the divine spirit then passes into the reader or the listener; so doing, it makes of him a person closer to the gods in his perfection:

Oh holy Poetry! Oh highest of divine inspirations! For by purging us of every stain, so making us pure and simple, you make our soul shine with its own [poetic] splendor, and through its proper and natural

¹⁷ For these works (and others), see the comments on such "Enthusiasmusliteratur" given in Zilsel, *Geniebegriffes*, 276 ff., "Das 'göttliche' Ingenium."

strength, as also through its intelligence, which is the chief and pilot of that same soul, you cause it to obtain from the angels, and in a single moment, whatever it desires.¹⁸

Likewise, in Tomasso Correa's *De antiquitate, dignitateque poesis & poetarum differentia* (1586: "Concerning the Antiquity and Dignity of Poetry and the Distinctions Between Poets"), it was argued that the "divine furor" is itself directly responsible for the most excellent class of poetry. It denotes the presence of God in man, and so it represents the expression of his highest capacities. Specifically, states Correa, this is that *furor*, or *afflatus* (inspiration), of which Plato spoke. From it, there comes all such poetry as celebrates the great deeds of our ancestors, and which thereby serves to render us and our progeny more perfect. More specifically, it is the poetry of the prophets and the seers, that is, the kind generating sacred letters and religious writings, which belongs in this super-mundane category. According to Correa,

In this kind of poetry were active almost all those holy prophets whose works we have in sacred letters, those who, in part, predicted many future things, and who, in part, revealed to mortals many things about God and about heavenly matters, and who, in part, celebrated excellent deeds, and who, in part, exhorted men by divine warnings to religion and to the other virtues, and who, in part, deterred them from vices. All these things those men have done, as inspired and impelled by a heavenly spirit, and, deservedly, these things are referred to this first kind of poetry.¹⁹

To cite yet another instance, the more pertinent passages in the *Ion* (534 B-C) were translated early in the nineteenth century by the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822)—and in a way that even foreshadows the "possessed," balletic and automatist, procedures of a Jackson Pollock (and as shown in **fig. 23**). According to Shelley,

For the authors of those great poems which we admire do not attain to excellence through any rules of art, but [instead they] utter their beautiful melodies of verse in a state of inspiration and, as it were,

¹⁸ Menechini, as quoted in Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance*, 298–99.

¹⁹ Correa, as in *ibid.*, 320. For a number of citations to the same effect, see *ibid.*, 229, 250, 253–4, 259–62, 264, 271, 273, 275, 283, 285, 287, 294, 302, 312, 322–3, 495, 599, 715, 771, 785, 800, 807 (oddly, this exhaustive study never mentions Ficino, and such as he is extensively quoted here in Chapter 5).

possessed by a spirit not their own [and they] create those admired songs of theirs in a state of divine insanity, like the Corybantes, who lose all control over their reason in the enthusiasm of the sacred dance [as shown in **fig. 4**]; and during this supernatural possession they are excited to the rhythm and harmony which they communicate to men. . . . Whilst a man retains any portion of the thing called reason, he is utterly incompetent to produce poetry or to vaticinate. . . . The God seems purposely to have deprived all poets, prophets and soothsayers of every particle of reason and understanding, the better to adapt them to their employment as his ministers and interpreters.²⁰

Even though here the differentiating *leit-motiv* is particularly "Dionysian" (of a type already minutely examined), the main idea—"vatic inspiration"—was, of course, already a commonplace by the time Shelley provided his translation. Since the priest-like role of the "divine" poet was by then an established *topos*, that is, just another conventional rhetorical trope, so one did not have to directly refer to Plato—or any of the *other* antique exponents of the concept. For instance, according to Alexander Gerard's discussion, in his *Essays on Genius* (1774), the essentially supernatural workings of artistically inspired "imagination" could be truly breathtaking, fiery, incandescent, and even nearly self-consuming, not to mention wholly unpredictable:

Imagination darts amongst it [the poet's thinking] with great rapidity; and by this rapidity its ardour is more inflamed. . . . Its motions become still more impetuous, till the mind is enraptured with the subject, and exalted into an ecstasy. In this manner, the fire of genius, like a divine impulse, raises the mind above itself, and by the natural influence of imagination actuates it as if it were supernaturally inspired.²¹

It is not too difficult to see how in all these "exalted and ecstatic," but nonetheless essentially routine, observations there has been wrought a curious, but unquestionable significant transformation of the medieval "God-Artisan" (*Deus artifex*). In short, He is now become an earthly poet, a mere mortal.²² Now the poem itself, as the quintessential "work of art," has itself become a microcosm, an autonomous "creation," and its maker (*poietēs*), the Poet, thus becomes its all-powerful, self-creating Pantokrator.

²⁰ Shelley, as quoted in Osbourne, *Aesthetics and Art Theory*, 201–2; cf. *Ion* 534 B–C, as in *Great Dialogues of Plato*, 18–21, where Plato concludes (*Ion* 535C) that "it is not by any art or science [that great Poetry is produced], but by divine dispensation and possession."

²¹ Gerard, as quoted in Abrams, *Mirror and the Lamp*, 191.

²² For the medieval "Deus artifex," see Curtius, *European Literature*, 544 ff.

What has occurred is truly momentous, nothing less than the replacement of the traditional idea of the poem (and also the visual work of art) as a *mimesis*, or “mirrou of Nature.” Now the standard “mimetic” convention becomes replaced by a wholly different concept, the modern notion of the poem—or any *other* artwork—as *heterocosmos*, that is, the autonomous creation of “another world.”²³ The fabrication of this *other* world—the poem itself derived from the idea residing in the mind of its cosmic maker—represents an act analogous to God’s primordial creation of the “real” world. Much the same thing was said by the Symbolists—and their writings represent the immediate historical means of entrance for, as we shall soon see, the concept of the Artist-Priest-Prophet conflation into currently approved avant-garde art theory of the *orthodox*-modernist persuasion.

The most significant evidence to this end is the verb “create,” which is today routinely applied to the present-day production of *any* praiseworthy confection of the Avant-Garde. Now, even spotty-faced art students enrolled in provincial state universities are routinely assigned classwork for which they must endlessly “create.” Earlier, it was otherwise.

Significantly, the verb “create”—but only in the *past* tense—appears in the Bible (and nearly uniquely) in the very first sentence of the Book of Genesis: “*In principio creavit Deus caelum et terram.*” Likewise, nearly every other Scriptural employment—few indeed—of the verb *creare*, “to create,” uniquely refers to an act performed by the Omnipotent Overlord, *not* to any executed by mere men (or women)—and certainly none performed by any poets or painters.²⁴ Moreover, classical, and even medieval, Latin had always used the verb *facere*, “to make,” to refer to the terrestrial operations, whether artistic or mechanical, as performed by mere men. It was, in fact, during the Renaissance when the appellation “*divino*” first came to be routinely applied to either the artistic masterpiece—or even to the artist himself (beginning with Michelangelo), and then marking his professional epiphany as a decidedly god-like “*creatore*.”²⁵ Evaluations of “cre-

²³ I owe this definition, and what immediately follows, to Abrams, *Mirror and Lamp*, 272 ff., “The Poem as Heterocosm.”

²⁴ A few other instances of the appearance in the Vulgate of *creare* (vs. *facere*) may be noted, all of which clearly have omnipotent functions and sources: Genesis 1:21, 27; 2:3; Isaiah 45:7; 65:17–18.

²⁵ For more details on the historical evolution of terminology applying to the

ation," particularly *who* gets to do it, have obviously changed considerably since the Middle Ages!

As with nearly every other significant event in the creation of the current avant-garde mentality, the major mythic components were *creavit* in the Renaissance by Italians. A case in point is the *Opera di Dante degli Alighieri col Comento* (1481: "A Commentary on the Works of Dante") written by Cristoforo Landino. Landino was a fully participating member of the Florentine "Academy" headed by Marsilio Ficino; besides that, he was also an author often studied by Michelangelo, especially his commentaries on Dante's *Divine Comedy*. According to this erudite Neoplatonist,

The Greeks say *poeta* from the verb *poîn* [sic. ποιεῖν], which is half-way between *create*, which act is peculiar to God, when, out of nothing, He brings forth anything into being. And "making" [*fare*] is the term which applies to men when they compose with matter and form in any art [meaning sculpture as well: fig. 1]. It is for this reason that, although the feigning of the poet is not entirely out of nothing, it nevertheless departs from making and comes very near to creating. And God is the supreme poet, and the world is His poem.²⁶

Although specifically couched as a theory of poetry, it may be argued that Landino broadly expresses contemporary notions of artistic creativity and "inspiration." Since his observations were to become a commonplace, we need to explore further their context in the collection of theses which introduce his annotated text of Dante's *Divina commedia*.²⁷ After a brief prologue, including an extended defense of Dante against his detractors, Landino proceeds in a series of *topica* to praise his fellow Florentines for a variety of activities—for their learning, their eloquence, their painting and sculpture, their music, their civil law, and their business acumen. Then comes an account of Dante's life, followed by the three interrelated essays of the greatest interest to us: "What Is Poetry and the Poet, and About Its Divine and Very Ancient Origin," "The Divine Frenzy," and "That the Origin of Poets Is Ancient."

"deification" of the artist and the signs pointing to his divinely inspired brain-work, so manifested by his handiwork, see Zilsel, *Geniebegriffes*, 276 ff., "Das 'göttliche' Ingenium."

²⁶ Landino, as quoted in Abrams, *Mirror and the Lamp*, 273.

²⁷ For these passages, see Landino, *Scritti*, I: 140–48. The resumé following is based on Heninger, *Sidney and Spenser: The Poet as Maker*, 178–80.

In the first essay, Landino begins by challenging the authority of “all the most serious philosophers” in order to magnify the contemporary poet. “No sort of writer may be found,” he argues, “who, either by the loftiness of his eloquence or by the divine quality of his wisdom, has at any time been equal to the poet.” In this passage poetry is conventionally associated with both Ciceronian *eloquentia* and with the Platonic notion that poets have privileged access to celestial wisdom. Landino goes on to mention Aristotle—“a man of great genius and for learning, the most notable since Plato”—who, according to Landino, continued in this laudatory vein and believed that “in the earliest times priests and poets were the very same.” Considered as a creative artist, not only is the poet the most admirable of writers, but also poetry is itself the most esteemed of all the arts. There are several reasons for esteeming such creative activity. According to Landino, (1) poetry is a comprehensive art, embracing all the others; (2) it has metrical structure and it submits to the ornamentation of rhetorical figures; (3) it records all human experience; (4) it makes even ordinary subject matter seem heavenly; (5) in the tradition of Horace, it both teaches and delights. Poetry—and by implication all creative art—achieves this distinction because it derives from a divine frenzy. By making explicit references to the *Ion* and the *Phaedrus* (as quoted in Chapter 3), Landino indicates that his argument represents a reiteration of Plato’s authoritative definitions.

Landino’s interpretation of the *Phaedrus* is especially revealing because it shows how readily Plato was turned by the Renaissance Humanists into a devout Christian who believed in God’s providence. As Landino explicitly states, “The noted philosopher [Plato] adds that the Muses at times infuse this divine spirit into the least likely people, because divine providence wishes to show that the most famous poems are not the inventions of wise men, but instead are gifts of God.” At this point, Landino introduces the Muses and gives his description of their role in artistic creativity. As he tells it, it is the Muses who “choose” the poet (or, extending the argument, an artist), no matter how unlikely a candidate he may appear to be, and they pour into him the divine spirit, so inducing a creative fit within him. Furthermore, since the Muses act on behalf of God Himself, the poem—a work of art—is a gift, the result of His active kindness or charity. Like mercy, poetry (that is, creative art) drops directly down from heaven. Landino concludes by again citing Plato, who “affirms in the *Phaedrus* that no one, not even the most diligent

or the most erudite, becomes a poet unless he is stirred by the divine frenzy"; and he shores up the authority of Plato by directly quoting Ovid (*Fasti* 6.5–6), and then by offering a string of rapid references to Democritus, Origen, and Cicero.

This elaboration of "divine frenzy" as a prerequisite for creative utterance next leads Landino to a discussion of poets as *prophets*. He affirms that they are seers, the mouthpieces of deity: "God willed *ab initio* that his Mysteries be announced to the people by the poets." As Landino reports, this was the "prophetic" view held by the Romans, and he gives a supportive etymology for *vates*: "a word meaning a *vi mentis*—that is, 'with vehemence,' and 'with agitation of mind'." The Greeks, however, held a different view, and Landino notes that they traced the meaning of the word "poet" to the verb *poiein*, meaning simply "to make." Nonetheless, Landino develops a poetics based upon his own creative etymology: "The Greeks derived the word 'poet' from the verb *poiein*, which is halfway between 'creating' [*create*], which is what God does when—out of nothing—He brings something into existence, and 'making' [*fare*], which is what men do when in any art they compose out of matter and form."

As an initial (but undeclared) premise, Landino obviously assumes an analogy between the poet as maker and the *Deus artifex* who created the universe. In line with a long-standing theological debate, however, Landino distinguishes between the Hebraic-Christian God, who performed the miracle of *creatio ex nihilo*, and the pre-Christian "demiurge" described in Plato's *Timaeus*; the latter is less than omnipotent since he performs the somewhat less wondrous feat of simply imposing form upon preexistent matter. According to Landino, whereas the pagan god Jupiter "creates," Plato's demiurge merely "makes." As a mortal creator/maker, Landino's poet operates somewhere between these two fictive acts; as he states, "Although the fiction of the poet is not produced entirely out of nothing, yet it is far from 'making' and it comes closer to 'creating'." Since it would be impious to claim that the Poet creates with the same freedom from constraint as does God, Landino declines to go that far. Nonetheless, by his reckoning, the creative artist does attain a level of creativity closer to *creatio ex nihilo* than to the simple reworking of what already exists.

Landino's idea of the Poet—he who "comes very near to creating" like God, He who Himself is "the supreme poet"—quickly became a commonplace. According to Torquato Tasso's *Discorsi del poema eroico* (1594: "Discourses on the Heroic Poem"), the operations

of all “heroic” (*eroico*) art “appear to us to be almost divine, and so they serve to imitate the first Artificer,” that is, God Himself. For Tasso, it is now a commonplace that “the poet of excellence is called *divino* for no other reason than that, resembling in his works the Supreme Artificer, he comes to participate in His divinity.” This divinely inspired, even divinely endowed, earthling being, that is, *il Poeta*, is able to create poems which are themselves quite like “a little world.” By this momentous conflation, states Tasso, “human art, operating in and around all created things, imitates divine art itself”—“*l’arte humana, operando intorno alle cose create, imita l’arte divina*.” Accordingly, the only beings privileged to sport the title of “Creator” at this date are *either* the heroic Poet-Artist *or* God Himself: “*Non merita nome di creatore, se non Iddio ed il Poeta*.”²⁸

Since this notion of the god-like, or “divine,” artistic creator was to become so prominent in literary theory during the Mannerist period, it was only natural that it would be similarly well received—and then quickly appropriated during the sixteenth century—by contemporary *art* critics. Needless to say, one hears of no painters complaining at that time of their metaphorical elevation into a kind of vocational-professional heaven. A case in point is a treatise by Federico Zucarri dealing with *L’Idea de’ pittori, scultori ed architetti* (1607: “The [Platonic] *Idea* of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects”). Besides concluding that all human art is inherently “accidental,” Zucarri announces that the omnipotent and omnivoyant God intently:

regards the Internal Design, in which He perceives all things that He *has made*, and which He is *making*, which He *will make* [all forms of the verb *fare*], with a single glance [and] in order to show in a small replica the excellence of His divine art, God *created* [*creato*, from *creare*] man in His image and likeness, so making him almost like a second God [*fosse quasi un secondo Dio*]. He wished to grant him [likewise] the ability to form in himself an inner intellectual Design . . . in order that, with this Design, one almost imitating God and vying with Nature, he could produce an infinite number of artificial things resembling natural ones, and so, by means of painting and sculpture, man makes visible [*farci vedere*] new Paradises on Earth.

Man, however, forms within himself various designs corresponding to the different things he conceives. His design is, therefore, an accident [*però il suo Disegno è accidentale*]. . . . Art proceeds to bring forth artificial objects in the manner that Nature itself proceeds, [namely]

²⁸ Tasso, as quoted in Abrams, *Mirror and the Lamp*, 381.

guided toward its own goal and toward its own procedures by an intellectual principle. . . . Art, chiefly with the aid of the above named [internal] design, observes precisely the same method in its procedure. Therefore, Nature can be imitated by Art, and Art is able to imitate Nature.²⁹

The larger cultural significance of all this was summed up some time ago by Rensselaer W. Lee:

The Neo-Platonic doctrine that beauty is essentially *gratia*—an emanation from the countenance of God, which is perceived by the artist in earthly things because he possesses and is aware of a like emanation in his own soul—gave a mystical character to the conception of beauty at the end of the Mannerist period that was opposed to the classical conception accepted by the Renaissance, namely that beauty depends on the proportion of parts. The association of the Idea of beauty in the artist's soul with a divine emanation [as in *enthousiasmos*] means that the creative faculty, since it partakes of the absolute, can no more be forced into the groove of the rules than beauty can be defined in terms of mathematical proportion. . . .

The notion that genius is "inspired," and that the "rules" are ineffective to produce great art, goes back to a famous passage in Plato's *Phaedrus* (245a): "But he who without divine madness comes to the doors of the Muses, confident that he will be a good poet by art (*ex téchnes* [literally, "from technique"]), meets with no success, and the poetry of the same man vanishes into nothingness before that made by the madman." . . . In insisting on the necessity of *inspiration* in artistic creation, as opposed to reason (even though the latter also be encouraged to make its contribution), the Platonic tradition of the Renaissance prepared the way for the enthusiastic reception later of the doctrine of Longinus.³⁰

Another result, as we shall see in later chapters dealing with the Symbolist contributions to a distinctively modernist concept of inspiration, was the installation early in the twentieth century of a kind of stridently avant-garde "Artist-Priest-Prophet."

Liberal Art-Making and Michelangelo's Bacchus

In the Renaissance, as we see, Bacchus (as shown in **figs. 1, 6, 7, 14**) was commonly taken in an unprecedented way to represent an

²⁹ Zucarri, *L'Idea*, 1:7, 1:10, as quoted in Panofsky, *Idea*, 87, 89.

³⁰ Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis*, 26–27, n. 108.

emblem of “Freedom” and, additionally, was employed as an paradigm of the kind of unfettered creative-artistic “Genius” (*ingenium*) uniquely celebrated by Renaissance art theorists. The momentous, wholly unprecedented, result is the one announced by Zucarri: “Therefore, Nature can be imitated by Art, and Art is able to imitate Nature.” Accordingly, another understood meaning of Michelangelo’s *Bacchus* in 1496 (at least as entertained by the *eruditi*) would have developed against the polemical background enframing a new topos belonging to disputes about the “Free Arts” (*artes liberales*). Given that the evolution of this argument is all too well known to art historians—including Michelangelo’s apparent illustration of the theme (in his “First Project” for the Tomb of Julius II)—I need deal with it only briefly.³¹

The scheme of the Liberal Arts goes back to classical Greece, when it was called *eukuklios paideia*, meaning “the customary, ordinary education”; this term also provides the root for our contemporary adjective “encyclopedic.” Seneca (in his *Epistola LXXXVIII*), however, seems to provide the *locus classicus* for the term *artes liberales*, which is in turn based on *studia liberalia*. They are called *liberal*, he says, because they are worthy of a “free” (*liber*) man. Hence, as it was further argued by Seneca and others, conversely the “mechanical arts” (*artes mechanicae*), also including Painting, Sculpture and even Architecture, are still to be excluded from the canon of the Liberal Arts (whereas Music, an eponymous gift from the Muses, is admitted). The sculptor or painter was, therefore, just called a *banausos* by the Greeks, that is a mere mechanic (originally a fire-worker or smith).

There was no word even remotely corresponding to our “Art” in the pre-Renaissance period: the Greek *technê* and the Latin *ars* simply denoted all kinds of human, but merely manual or “mechanical,” applied skills. Only Poets, who were often practising *mousikê*, were allowed to be “inspired” by the Muses, themselves surrogates of the

³¹ On these points (among many other publications one could cite), see Curtius, *European Literature*, 36 ff.; Kempers, *Painting, Power and Patronage*; Wittkower, *The Artist and the Liberal Arts*; see also (especially) Kristeller, “The Modern System of the Arts,” in his *Renaissance Thought II*, 163–227; see also Janson, “The Birth of ‘Artistic License’.” For our artist in particular, who actually illustrated on the Tomb of Julius II (according to Condivi) the “*artes liberales*,” as personifications of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture, in the guise of “Prisoners,” see Garrard, “The Liberal Arts and Michelangelo’s First Project for the Tomb of Julius II”; Janson, *Apes and Ape Lore*, 295–301; Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, 187–99.

Gods. Besides becoming uniquely privy to Inspiration, in order to achieve his hard-won liberation, a post-medieval, would-be "artist" also needed (and ever more desperately) some self-serving art "theory" (or *Scientia*). That "Science" should particularly be the kind of *theory* that claimed his thought-processes to be at least as profound as that calibre of cognition and cogitation traditionally accorded to the Poets and Philosophers. That desideratum made sense: only Poets and Philosophers were acknowledged to be serious and studious types who worked with an invisible (like music) medium, *words*, that is, rather than those visible (all-too-physical and materially fixed) pictures and sculptures.

The new professional estimation of painters and sculptors first surfaced in Florence. It now appears that the earliest written reference lending to the visual artist that specifically intellectual (or "ingenious") status which had always been accorded students of the Liberal Arts appears in the *Florentine Chronicle* composed by Filippo Villani. As was stated here around 1400: "An opinion now [commonly] expressed by many people is by no means silly: that painters are not lacking in that Genius [*pictores non inferioris ingenii*], a trait which has [traditionally] designated as 'masters' the practitioners of the [written] Liberal Arts."³² As may be parenthetically added, medieval art was essentially direct and popular in purpose, or didactic and so crafted to be made accessible to the largely unread—and the illiterate, of course, comprised the vast majority. To the contrary, the new—non-ecclesiastical or profane—Renaissance art implicitly claimed a new kind of audience, the privileged few familiar with humanistic letters, that new élite of *litterati* and *genii* historically belonging to the post-Gutenberg period, the age making the printed word ever more available to those with a disposable income sufficient to acquire books.³³

A decisive turning point is represented by the theoretical statements of another Florentine, Leon Battista Alberti, who verbalizes for us in contemporary terms the kind of interpretive attitudes that would have been applied to Michelangelo's *Bacchus* (**fig. 1**). In his

³² "Extimantibus multis, nec stulte quidem, pictores non inferioris ingenii his quos liberales artes fecere magistros": Villani, as in Schlosser, *Quellenbuch zur Kunstgeschichte*, 371.

³³ For an illuminating introduction to the new sociology of art-consumption arising from this increasingly literate culture, see Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*.

De Pictura (1435), Alberti emphatically advised painters—and so artists in general—to familiarize themselves “with the poets and orators,” those learned men who could then stimulate ambitious artists to “discover” (*invenire*), and so to give form to traditional pictorial themes in an innovative, also more professionally competitive, way. We have already seen how an erudite type like Angelo Poliziano was, in fact, a notable example of the learned poets and rhetoricians who actually would, and in fact did, liberate the Artist (for instance, Michelangelo), as much from the dusty workshop as from his traditional, but increasingly ignoble, “mechanical servitude.”

Alberti initially repeated Cicero’s premise “that painting is to be pleasing to both learned and unlearned” (*che sta gratta ai dotti quanto a l’indocti*). However, as Alberti also remarked (Book III, 56), “the idea of beauty, which even the most expert have difficulty in discerning, thoroughly eludes the ignorant.” So doing, Alberti pioneered an exclusionary idea—the informed (*dotti*) or sophisticated versus the unread and clueless, or *indotti*—and this intellectual differentiation became ubiquitous in subsequent art treatises. From this point on, the connoisseur in pursuit of artistic beauty increasingly needs to be assisted, indeed initiated, into an understanding of the best, often the most recondite, visual art. Today, that kind of “initiated” art is called “*avant-garde*,” a term (as *vanguardista*) naturally unknown to Alberti. For him, however, functionally the result was/is rather like a contemporary process of “initiation” into the ancient Dionysiac Mysteries—for instance, and in contemporary terms, Pico’s “*epopteia*.” Similarly, today all American academics professing the “Fine Arts” feel constrained to demonstrate the fact of their verbose initiation into the Gallic *mysteria* of postmodernist literary hermeneutics.³⁴

Alberti’s complementary recommendation for a new collusion “with the poets and orators” on the part of the presumably mostly unlettered artist likewise represents the initial important statement advancing this novel professional symbiosis. As Alberti put it, “I want the painter, as far as he is able, to be learned in all the liberal arts. . . . It will be of advantage [in this pursuit] to take pleasure in poets and orators.” The obvious “advantage” for the painter resides in the fact that these are “literary men who are full of information

³⁴ For an exhaustive (504 pp.) send-up of this kind of trendy hermeneutic endeavor, see Phake-Potter, *Postmodernist Deconstruction for Dummies*.

about many subjects which will be of great assistance in preparing the composition of a *historia* [narrative composition], and the great virtue of this consists primarily in its *inventione*," or novel application of standard literary themes and narrative motifs. Alberti's final recommendation (*De pictura*, III, 53–4) is emphatic:

I therefore advise the studious painter [or sculptor] to make himself familiar with poets and orators and other men of letters [*litterati*], for he will not only obtain excellent ornaments from such learned minds, but he will also be assisted in those very inventions which in painting [or sculpture] may gain him the greatest praise.³⁵

Accordingly, to one degree or another, Alberti's admonition represents the momentous published recommendation initially inspiring all subsequent arguments for the would-be, secular "Learned Artist." Including obviously ambitious types like Michelangelo, particularly these apprentice-artists are enjoined to actively seek out and consult with those already learned (*dotti*), recognized scholars (*eruditi*), someone like, for instance, Angelo Poliziano. Today, to create the same thing, that "Learned Art" now called "avant-garde," eager American youth now enrolls itself in an accredited state-university art program, the home of many learned (*dotti*) instructors, where, instead of neo-platonic wisdom, one today gets a salutary infusion of postmodernist "art theory" (*Scientia*, as it were). The professional results are rather the same: in the end, all these young American artists are officially certified by the State as indeed having been transformed into "Learned Artists": their BFA and MFA degrees prove that bureaucratic point. Unfortunately, finding gainful employment as a paid artist proved to be, of course, rather a different matter in, say, the year 2000 from the way it was in 1500.

The implicit message for ambitious would-be "artists" (versus manual workers) during the Renaissance seems to be that something like this: Bookish, even exclusionary, knowledge, as *Scientia*, shall set you free (*liber*), meaning "freed" largely from onerous "mechanical servitude" and its concomitant social restrictions. All of the details belonging to this momentous historical process of a collective professional elevation of the Artist from his former, tenaciously lowly,

³⁵ Alberti, *On Painting*, 88–89. For an objective analysis, providing various historical examples, of the interplay between humanist advisors and Renaissance artists, see Hope, "Artists, Patrons, and Advisors in the Italian Renaissance."

“mechanical” non-status are, however, well known.³⁶ The strictly intellectual aspect belonging to Michelangelo’s youthful Florentine initiation into this exclusionary, perhaps even occult, *scientia* may be further addressed. The underlying spirit of it seems well summed up by a famous dictum broadcast by an acquaintance of both Galli and Riario, Cardinal Egidio da Viterbo, who extolled the pagan *mysteria* as models of religious eloquence, then specifically claiming that: “Dionysus proclaims that the divine ray cannot reach us unless it is covered with poetic veils.”³⁷

It was, in fact, later to become a commonplace assertion that such “veiling” was also Michelangelo’s intention. Accordingly, in his *Dialogo della Pittura* (1557), Lodovico Dolce observes that Michelangelo seems to “have imitated those great Philosophers who had deliberately hidden the supreme mysteries of human and theological Philosophy beneath the veil of Poetry”—“*Filosofi, che nascondevano sotto velo di Poesia misteri grandissimi*.”³⁸ Our contribution here, as a sort of Neoplatonic “poetic unveiling,” has been to restore an important contribution, not yet so exhaustively treated, to the evolutionary process of a Renaissance canon of the *artes liberales*. That overlooked factor was the strictly Bacchic-Dionysiac contribution of the Renaissance, one wholly reconstructed in an essentially novel fashion from standard classical, textual sources by mainly Florentine humanists.

In sum, Michelangelo’s *Bacchus* must have been viewed by contemporary *eruditi* in a very broad manner. Admittedly, we have no

³⁶ For the acceptance, in Italy, of Painting and Sculpture among the *artes liberales*, see, besides various publications cited above, particularly Blunt, *Artistic Theory in Italy*, ch. 4, “The Social Position of the Artist.” Elsewhere, the elevation of the artist into these exalted ranks did not occur quite so quickly; for the delayed process of professional assimilation of the “Fine Artist” in (for example) Spain, see Curtius, *European Literature*, 559–70, “Calderón’s Theory of Art and the ‘Artes Liberales’”; for a particular case-study, see Moffitt, “Velázquez in the Alcázar Palace in 1656.”

³⁷ Egidio, as quoted in Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, 14; the reference here is, of course, to Dionysius the Areopagite, supposedly a Neoplatonist and the Athenian disciple of St. Paul (Acts 17:34); for Egidio’s part in the Lateran Council where he advocated the Ficinian concept of the immortality of the soul, see Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought*, 63. For poetic “veiling” (*involutum, integumentum, revelatio*, etc.) as common practice in medieval allegory, of course also representing terminology commonly shared by Renaissance allegorists, see Allen, *Mysteriously Meant*; Rivers, *Classical and Christian Ideas*.

³⁸ Dolce, *L’Aretino*, 164. For a recent, and usefully detailed, analysis of the actual mechanics of one of Michelangelo’s “poetic veilings,” see Barnes, “Metaphorical Painting: Michelangelo, Dante, and the ‘Last Judgment’.”

useful comments from the artist specifically bearing upon his way of conceiving his youthful commission for a life-sized *Bacchus* (fig. 1). Nonetheless, with the evidence already at hand, we can now plausibly reconstruct the nature of various associations which his learned audience (including possible humanist advisors) would have typically, perhaps even inevitably, then brought to bear upon the interpretation of Michelangelo's "eikastic" rendering of the ancient God of Wine.³⁹ Additionally, recent scholarship shows, for instance, that it was common practice during the Renaissance to supply appropriate narrative "captions" to uninscribed ancient sculptures that came to light from time to time.⁴⁰ The same hermeneutic practice would have been applied to a modern *ekphrasis* of a celebrated ancient work of art, for instance, a *mimesis* of Praxiteles's lost rendering of *Dionysius* (fig. 6).

From what we know today of the Renaissance *mentalité*, it is obvious that contemporary humanists would have similarly interpreted an ambitious, contemporary work like this, namely "*il Bacco moderno*" by Michelangelo (fig. 1), in an active way. They would do so if only because, according to Alberti (among others), "the idea of [artistic] beauty, which the most experts have difficulty in discerning, thoroughly eludes the ignorant." At this time, in case one might have forgotten, under Neoplatonic auspices Beauty (*kalón*, *pulchrum*) essentially meant moral or ethical Goodness (*Bonus*), a philosophical principle in its turn inviting further contemporary speculative investigation. This idea of an essentially moralized Beauty demanding active interpretation is, for example, made apparent by certain chapter titles in Ficino's *Symposium*: "Pulchritudo est Splendor Divinae Bonitatis" (II, 3), "Pulcher est Bonus" (V, 1), and so forth.

Moreover, just as Alberti suggests, the idea of active interpretation of art-works during the Renaissance period implicitly rested upon a new (or post-medieval) presumption of social superiority and its concomitant intellectual pretense. Today, this exclusionary principle is unquestionably the underlying (but mostly unspoken) premise

³⁹ For the kind of active, nearly exegetical, interpretive process that Renaissance readers typically brought to their readings, particularly those with classical subjects, see (besides Allen, *Mysteriously Meant*; Rivers, *Classical and Christian Ideas*) Wallace, "Examples are Best Precepts": Readers and Meanings in Seventeenth-Century Poetry."

⁴⁰ Barkan, "The Beholder's Tale: Ancient Sculpture, Renaissance Narratives" (and using the term "captions"); see also Barkan, "Living Sculptures: Ovid, Michelangelo, and 'The Winter's Tale'"; idem, *Gods Made Flesh*.

propelling nearly all “postmodernist art theory.” Already in the Renaissance however, opportune interpretation, like entrance into the Liberal Arts, had become a prerogative of, and the means for actually identifying fellow, self-designated, “superior” social classes, or at least of an emerging aristocracy of the mind.

Earlier, in a standard treatise on upper-class education, Pier Paolo Vergerio (*De ingenuis moribus et liberalibus studii adolescentiae*, 1404: “Concerning the Parts of Genius and the Liberal Studies of Youth”) explicitly noted how interpretive skills allow “men of distinction” to recognize one another and, by implication, to discriminate against all those unable to do so. “The beauty and grace of objects,” Vergerio observes, “both natural ones and those made by man’s art, are things it is proper for men of distinction [that is, those men distinguished by education and social and economic elevation] to be able to discuss with each other and to appreciate.”⁴¹

Michael Baxandall’s conclusion is that, even at this time, “a man with intellectual self-respect was in no position to remain quite passive; he was *obliged* to discriminate.” Moreover, as Baxandall also recognizes, the Renaissance model of active viewer-interpretation of works of art stems from their intense study of classical treatises on rhetoric, and that connoisseurs had evidently felt themselves so enjoined to active interpretation, a kind of hermeneutical mimesis, and they had done so since the time of Giotto.⁴²

In Michelangelo’s time, the actual functioning of such verbally active viewer-interpretation of works of art is perhaps best illustrated by introducing another useful bit of contemporary literary evidence. This was a rhetorical poem written in 1506 by Jacobus Sadoletus in order to celebrate the seemingly miraculous retrieval in Rome of the *Laocoön Group*, a work long before made famous by Pliny (*NH* 36:37). (**fig. 15**) Conforming to the interests of his time, the modern Italian ekphrast made the *Laocoön* into an *exemplum doloris*, meaning a paragon of emotional expressionism. As Sadoletto explained, the famed sculptural ensemble provided an unprecedented exemplar of “ire,” “anguish,” “pity,” “keen pain,” “agony,” and so forth. Among other effects, here we find yet another art-historical precedent for the kind of *ausdrucksvoll* art later forthcoming from the

⁴¹ Vergerio, as quoted in Baxandall, *Painting and Experience*, 34.

⁴² Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators*, esp. 85–103.

German Expressionists. In short, the notion was current in Rome some four centuries before the formulation of their supposedly unprecedented Germanic proclivities for the visualization of intense human emotions, another "pathetic fallacy" as it were.

According to Sadoletto's *ekphrasis*, the ancient—and tenaciously mute—sculpture (**fig. 15**) reveals to properly alert, modern Roman minds the enviable ability "to give hard marble feeling until it breathes. We gaze upon the passion, anger, pain; we all but hear the groans, so great was your skill, you famous [artists from] Rhodes of old extolled. For a long time, the graces of your art lay low; again [that is, now] Rome sees them in a new day's kindly light."⁴³ Recent scholarship reveals how the *Laocoon* group was similarly read later in the Renaissance, then—during the Counter-Reformation period—it was repeatedly used as a properly emotionalized, contemporary moral metaphor for the sufferings of Christian martyrs. Among others, in Spain the painter El Greco had referred to the celebrated Hellenistic *exemplum doloris* in this strictly "Christian" manner in his painting of *Laocoon* and his sons expiring before the city-gates of Toledo.⁴⁴

"Difficulty" and the Hermeneutics of Michelangelo's Bacchus

As time went on, an attractive new element was added to such exclusionary social discourse of contemporary art criticism, *difficoltà*. This also happens to be a term intimately associated with Michelangelo's notoriously "difficult" aesthetic.⁴⁵ Likewise, interpretive "difficulty" seems the universal desideratum of postmodernist "critical discourse."⁴⁶ Originally, however, its particularly sociological basis was clearly spelled out in Count Baldassare Castiglione's immensely influential treatise on social decorum, *Il Cortegiano* ("The Courtier," finished by 1516, although only published in 1528). This is the primary historical

⁴³ Sadoletto, as quoted in Bieber, *Laocoön*, 13–15; for Sadoletto and Platonic inspiration, see above; for Michelangelo's applications of the *Laocoön*, which he saw as it was being unearthed, see Summers, *Language of Art*, 484, n. 2.

⁴⁴ For later rhetorical applications of the *Laocoön* in Counter-Reformation art, see Moffitt, "A Christianization of Pagan Antiquity."

⁴⁵ For this central term, "Difficoltà," see Summers, *Language of Art*, 177–85 (among other searching discussions included by him of that term).

⁴⁶ For an exhaustive, 500-page-long catalogue raisonné of currently practised, academic-theoretical *difficoltà* (here meaning "outrages"), again see Phake-Potter, *Postmodernist Deconstruction for Dummies*.

source for subsequent notions of “self-fashioning” (according to modern academics) or, more commonly, for the gratuitous fabrications of one’s “life-style” (according to the postmodernist *hoi polloi*). This work also provides a clear indication of the sociological, meaning class-based, sources for the Renaissance kind of “difficult” artistic terminology celebrated in contemporary *poesia*.

Here, in what constitutes the fundamental self-portrait of the Renaissance *cognoscento*, we read of the ineffable intellectual delights that rampant “difficulty” places before “facile” (meaning “popular,” or lower-class) interpretations of works of art. As Castiglione concludes (II, 30),

If the words which a writer uses have in them a little subtlety—I will not say difficulty, but instead subtlety—that is hidden, and thus they are not made so familiar as the words that are commonly used in speaking, they do give a certain greater authority to his creation and cause the reader [as interpreter] to proceed with more restraint and concentration, to reflect more, and to enjoy the talent and the doctrine of the writer; and, *by judiciously exerting himself a little, he tastes that pleasure which is only had when we achieve difficult things*. And if the ignorance of the one who reads is so great that he cannot overcome these difficulties, that is no fault of the writer—nor on this account is such a manner to be judged to be without beauty.⁴⁷

In fine, if the reader-viewer does not “understand” your “inspired” vanguard artwork, then it is *his* fault—and certainly not yours. Needless to say, that assumption was as commonplace at the end of the second millennium as it had been in the Cinquecento.

According to our interpretive reconstruction closely based upon historical texts, it appears that a properly informed contemporary interpretation of Michelangelo’s *Bacchus* (**fig. 1**) must have included some, if not all, of the following factors. First, the sculpture was obviously perceived by informed contemporaries to represent a skilled, almost heroic and certainly opportune, “imitation,” itself akin to strictly literary “ekphrasis.” Specifically, a contemporary connoisseur would have likely recognized this ambitiously mimetic statue—according to Condivi, “*il Bacco moderno*”—to represent a recreation of

⁴⁷ Castiglione, *Book of the Courtier*, 49 (emphasis mine). This statement may also be taken to represent the real *raison d’être* of “Mannerism,” an art movement which, nonetheless, became something like apocryphal material at the hands of early, “expressionistic,” twentieth-century art historians (Dvorák, Pinder, Hauser, etc.).

Praxiteles' greatest masterpiece, itself celebrated by most authors, ancient as well as Renaissance, as being *the* exemplary *Dionysios* made in Antiquity (**fig. 6**). Moreover, to those familiar with "euhemeristic" mythological interpretations—as presented by Boccaccio, Fulgentius, Albricus, and Berchorius, among others⁴⁸—a second intrinsic meaning naturally attached to such a strikingly contrived *Bacchus* (**fig. 1**). This would have been that of a symbolic conflation, equally classical and Christian in origin, of the concept of "Liberation" from earthly travails and troubles by *Pater Liber*, that is, Bacchus.

Additionally, there is the third or Christian contribution: Berchorius even makes his Bacchus into a *soter*, a Saviour, and literally calls him "Christ-like." Fourth, to all those Florentines familiar with post-medieval Neoplatonic scripture, by logical extension this *Bacchus* by Michelangelo equally stands for, in strictly contemporary terms, intellectual and creative "Freedom." We saw, for instance, that Cartari explicitly called Bacchus a "*Dio della Libertà*" in 1556, and, fifty years later, Thuilius was making Bacchus the one god who "sharpens native wit, liberates both heart and mind and, as it were, breaks open the [creative] prison and so spurs on that steed of the poet." Nonetheless, both notions had been current much earlier.

Pursuing the strictly Ficinian perception, also shared by Pico, a fifth significance likely attached to this Renaissance *Bacchus* is as a sign of the devout mind "deeply drunken with God." That notion, with wine now appearing as a concrete sign of Divine Grace, was still current a century later in Ripa's *Iconologia*. So viewed, on a sixth level of meaning, Michelangelo's *Bacchus* (**fig. 1**) becomes a concrete manifestation of Divine Possession. Particularly in late Quattrocento Florentine philosophical circles, this "transported" state (as *raptus*) must itself represent exalted "Inspiration," a process which proves to be the very wellspring of sublime poetic, or generally artistic, expression.

Since Bacchus is generally taken by most Renaissance mythographers in a somewhat novel way to represent "Father Freedom," so in turn does he contain the latent ability, in a seventh meaning, to represent the core-idea of all the Liberal Arts (see **figs. 6, 14**). According to those commonplace arguments, the necessarily inventive *artes liberales* are innately superior, for being "free" (*liber*), to other

⁴⁸ On this standard mode of mythographical interpretation, see (of course) Seznec, *Survival of the Pagan Gods*.

lower, manual or servile (*mechanice*), activities and modes of expression. As such, a possible eighth signification is the very revelation of spiritual “Rebirth,” for Ficino specifically describes the Bacchic experience as *renatus*, and so by itself this idea potentially becomes broadly emblematic of Renaissance (*rinascimento* = “rebirth”) aspirations in general.

Our observations concerning the *Bacchus* (**fig. 1**) created by this particularly esteemed Renaissance artist potentially reveal some valuable new insights into the meaning of his earlier work. Michelangelo has always been thought by modern scholars to have represented, somehow, a “Neoplatonic artist.”⁴⁹ Michelangelo has additionally been frequently credited with coining an all-pervasive cultural icon, the modernist, “archetype of the artist: dedicated, solitary, single-minded, tormented, harassed, unsatisfied . . .”⁵⁰ Informed modern scholarship further acknowledges that Ficino was (in *De vita triplici*, 3.2) the first philosopher to link Melancholy—the humoral factor then conventionally inciting the persistently “modern” kind of “dedicated, solitary, single-minded, tormented, harassed,” creative endeavor—with “divine possession.”⁵¹

According to our interpretation, Michelangelo’s youthful *Bacchus* illustrates, and in some specific detail, the variety of impulses leading into his initial ventures into what might be called “Ficinian iconography.” Being a youthful work, the crucial *Bacchus* of 1496/97 (**fig. 1**) is accordingly easier to decipher in these contemporary terms than are Michelangelo’s later works. Those subsequent works are the ones in which the initial textual references and impulses became increasingly buried, or “covered with poetic veils” (particularly those specifically “Dionysiac”), either through greater subtlety of thought—then called *difficoltà*—or merely by more accomplished facility of workmanship. In sum, we must believe that the most appropriate title for Michelangelo’s *Bacchus* is the one given by Pliny to what he called Praxiteles’s “world renowned” masterpiece. Such as that long-lost

⁴⁹ On this interpretive issue, particularly in its much more complicated, much less explicit, later development within the artist’s oeuvre, again see Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, 171–230: “The Neoplatonic Movement and Michelangelo”; see also Blunt, *Artistic Theory in Italy*, ch. 5 (“Michelangelo”); Clements, *Michelangelo’s Theory*, esp. chapters 1, 7; the notion of associating Michelangelo with Neoplatonism is scarcely new; see Frey, *Dichtungen des Michelagnuolo Buonarroti*, esp. 96–99, 103–5.

⁵⁰ Murray, *Michelangelo*, 207.

⁵¹ For this argument, see Klibanski, Panofsky, Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*.

iconographic ensemble would have been read by modern Florentines, this celebrated *opus magnum* represented Bacchus-Dionysus as "Father Freedom (Noble Intoxication) with a Satyr."

Michelangelo's *Bacchus*, like any other significant artwork, is necessarily culture-specific. What has been done here, and for the first time, has been to situate Michelangelo's image firmly within the ideology of its time. Previous observations have not been so solidly grounded. Now we have the contemporary evidence explaining just *why*, as Roberta Olson recently observes, "Michelangelo's epicene adolescent god [fig. 1] is clearly inebriated, more so than in any ancient sculpture (perhaps [certainly!] as influenced by literary descriptions); his tipsy stance and his flaccid muscles reveal the consequences." Now we finally have the contemporary evidence additionally explaining just *how*, according to the same author, "the work's meaning is bound up with Neo-Platonism and its mystical orientation." Now, likewise, we have re-established a mostly forgotten, specifically *euhemeristic*, connection once existing between "Bacchic (Dionysiac) cults [desirous] to attain mystical union with the god through inebriation and eating raw flesh and blood," and its essential complement, namely: "the Catholic doctrine of Transubstantiation, where the Communion bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ."⁵²

Now, with the hermeneutic problem of Michelangelo's *Bacchus* (fig. 1) apparently solved, we may proceed to survey some significant events leading to a complementary, but strictly "modernist," rebirth of the ancient Dionysiac myth. Now the task is to show how, in the twentieth century, the legendary wine-god had returned among us mortals in order to enjoy some (but not all) of his original, Renaissance status as a metaphorical harbinger of "intoxicated" artistic creativity. For this, much credit was initially due to Friedrich Nietzsche. But before him there were the writers of the Age of Enlightenment, and their conclusions were to be amplified, even contested outright, by the Romantics.

⁵² Olson, *Italian Renaissance Sculpture*, 162.

PART II

“INSPIRATION” FOR THE NEO-DIONYSIAC
MODERNISTS

CHAPTER SEVEN

POST-RENAISSANCE “INSPIRATION,” FROM THE ENLIGHTENMENT TO THE ROMANTICS

“Inspiration” and Aesthetics in the Age of Enlightenment

The eighteenth century initially inherited the traditional concept of an externalized, or muse-derived, “Inspiration.” This familiar proposition was reiterated by, among others, Thomas Lodge in his *Defense of Poetry* (1758), where he makes reference to the familiar topos of the “heavenly gift,” with this labeled a “divine instinct from heaven,” also a “divine instinct,” or even a “celestial instinctation”; all these tropes are united in Lodge’s phrase: “Poetry commeth from above, from a heavenly seat of a glorious God.”¹ Much the same was reprised (with recourse to upper-case emphasis) by William Duff in his *An Essay on Original Genius* (1767), where he provides the full catalogue of essential phenomena:

A glowing ardor of Imagination is indeed (if we may be permitted the expression) the very soul of Poetry. It is the principal source of INSPIRATION; and the Poet who is possessed of it, like a Delphian Priestess, is animated with a kind of DIVINE FURY. The intenseness and vigour of his sensations produce that ENTHUSIASM of Imagination, which as it were hurries the mind out of itself; and which is vented in warm and vehement description, exciting in every susceptible breast the same emotions that were felt by the AUTHOR himself. It is this ENTHUSIASM which gives life and strength to poetical representations, renders them striking imitations of nature, and thereby produces that enchanting delight which genuine poetry is calculated to inspire. Without this animating principle, all poetical and rhetorical compositions are spiritless and languid, like those bodies that are drained of their vital juices.²

However, even if incited by the Muses, poetic inspiration was now ever more said to function independent of the “rules of art,” and

¹ Lodge, as quoted in Neumann, *Mitos de Artista*, 31.

² Duff, as in Clark, *Theory of Inspiration*, 70–71.

men so favored were ever more permitted to be negligent of the perfection of craft, and even to be disdainful of traditional knowledge. After the mid-eighteenth century, such license now becomes routinely accorded to the “natural genius.” Whereas formerly one “*had* a genius for” this or that creative activity (you name it), now it is simply affirmed that the outstanding artist “*is* a genius.” One of those newly minted *natural geniuses* was said to be William Shakespeare. An early appraisal of his innate trait of “natural learning,” a “lucky” gift, is found in the *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668) by John Dryden:

All the images of Nature were still present to him [Shakespeare], and he drew them not labouriously, but luckily; when he describes anything you more than see it, you feel it too. Those who accuse him to have wanted learning give him the great commendation: he was naturally learned, he needed not the spectacles of books to read nature; he looked inwards, and found her there.³

A major spokesman for the Neoclassicism characterizing the eighteenth-century artistic endeavor was Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768). In his *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (1764, “History of Ancient Art”), the German connoisseur described his intense sense of aesthetic reverie when confronted by the *Belvedere Apollo*, a sculpture then taken to represent the epitome of classical idealism. (**fig. 16**) In this instance, Winckelmann reverted to the classical-era terminology of spiritual “transport,” likewise including a clear reference to religious “inspiration,” and just as it had been said to have been experienced by ancient oracles:

In the presence of this miracle of art I forget all else, and I myself take a lofty position for the purpose of looking upon it in a worthy manner. My breast seems to enlarge and swell with reverence, like the breasts of those who were [formerly] filled with the spirit of prophecy. I feel myself transported [back in time] to Delos and into the Lycaean groves—places which Apollo honored by his presence—for my image [the *Belvedere Apollo*] seems to receive life and motion, just like the beautiful creation of Pygmalion.⁴

Winckelmann was an *amateur*, a “lover” of art, but not an artist. In contemporary terms, his subjective reaction is best called “aesthetic.”

³ Dryden, as in Neumann, *Mitos de Artista*, 32.

⁴ Winckelmann, as in Eitner, *Neoclassicism and Romanticism*, I, 19.

Aesthetics, as due to a new but characteristic interest in the wholly subjective or emotional side of experience, was to become a focal concern in the eighteenth century. The term "aesthetics" was first coined, and then made into a systematic (albeit pseudo-scientific) discipline, by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten in his *Aesthetica acromatica* (1750–58). *Nomen est omen*: the name comes from *aisthesis*, Greek for "sensation," and the German equivalent was *Empfindung*, meaning "feeling" or "sensation." Accordingly, Baumgarten defines aesthetics as "the science of sensuous knowledge" (but surely the unparalleled linking of *Wissenschaft* and *Empfindung* represents just another grandiose German oxymoron).⁵

A more extended, but still mostly conventional, reading of artistic *inspiration* than that one given by Winckelmann was provided by a practicing artist, Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792). As the President of the Royal Academy of Art explained in his "Third Discourse" (1770), rather than "imitation," the appointed task of the painter is "to improve [mankind] by the grandeur of his ideas." Moreover, presently "he must strive for fame, by captivating the imagination." As Sir Joshua reminds his audience,

The poets, orators, and rhetoricians of antiquity are continually enforcing this position; that all the arts receive their perfection from an ideal beauty, [that being] superior to what is to be found in individual nature. They are ever referring to the practice of the painters and sculptors of their times, particularly Phidias (the favorite artist of antiquity) to illustrate their assertions. As if they could not sufficiently express their admiration of this genius by what they knew, they have recourse to *poetical enthusiasm*. They call it *inspiration*; a gift from heaven. The artist is supposed to have ascended the celestial regions to furnish his mind with this perfect idea of beauty.

The next stage in Reynold's argument is to see whether the ancient concept of *inspiration*, also its central component of *poetical enthusiasm*, is still operative in the present moment, in 1770:

The Moderns are not less convinced than the Ancients of this superior power existing in art, nor are they less sensible of its effects. Every language has adopted terms expressive of this excellence. The *gusto grande* of the Italians, the *beau idéal* of the French, and *great style*, *genius*, and *taste* among the English are but different appellations of the same

⁵ For the general background of the term, see Yolton, *Blackwell Companion to the Enlightenment*, 14–18 (entry for "Aesthetics"), 56–57 ("Baumgarten").

thing. It is this intellectual dignity, they say, that ennobles the painter's art; it is that which lays the line between him and the mere mechanic. This [intellectual element] produces those great [painterly] effects in an instant, and which eloquence and poetry, by slow and repeated efforts, are scarcely able to attain. . . .

However, since Reynolds was a creature of the Age of Enlightenment, so must he value *reason* over *inspiration*, particularly that sort commonly said to have an otherworldly source:

But, as I have formerly observed, enthusiastic admiration seldom promotes knowledge. Though a student by such praise may have his attention roused, and a desire excited in him of running in this great career, yet [if] he examines his own mind, he perceives there nothing of that *divine inspiration* with which, he is told, so many others have been favored. He [alas] has never traveled to heaven to gather new ideas; he finds himself possessed of no other qualification than what mere common observation and a plain understanding can confer. . . . As upon many other occasions, we ought to distinguish how much [credit] is to be given to *enthusiasm*, and how much to *reason*. . . .

Could we teach *taste* or *genius* by rules, then they would no longer be taste and genius. There neither are, nor can there be, any precise invariable rules for the exercise, or the acquisition of these great qualities. . . . The power of discovering what is deformed in nature, or in other words, what is particular and uncommon, can be acquired only by experience. . . . This idea of the perfect state of nature, which the Artist calls the Ideal Beauty, is the great leading principle, by which works of genius are conducted. . . . This is the idea which has acquired, and seems to have a right to the epithet of *divine*. It may be said to preside, like a supreme judge, over all the production of nature, appearing to be possessed of the will and intention of the Creator, as far as they regard the external form of living thing. When a man once possesses this idea in its perfection, there is no danger but that he will be sufficiently warmed by it himself; thus he will be able to warm and ravish every one else.⁶

However, in his "Fifth Discourse" (1772) Reynolds did name an artist who was clearly "inspired." And that inspired artist was the creator of the *Drunken Bacchus* (fig. 1), none other than Michelangelo.

If we put the great[est] artists in a light of comparison with each other, Raphael had more Taste and Fancy, [but] Michael Angelo [had] more Genius and Imagination. The one excelled in beauty, the other in energy. Michael Angelo has more of the Poetical Inspiration; his ideas

⁶ Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, 43–46 (emphasis mine on key terms).

are vast and sublime; his people are a superior order of beings. . . . Michael Angelo's works have a strong, peculiar and marked character; they seem to proceed from his own mind entirely, and that mind [was] so rich and abundant that he never needed, or seemed to disdain, to look abroad for foreign help. . . . If, as Longinus thinks, the sublime is the highest excellence that human composition can attain to, and abundantly compensates the absence of every other beauty, and atones for all other deficiencies, then Michael Angelo demands the preference.⁷

Later, in the nineteenth century, there were to be, however, many dissenters. Among these was the visionary painter William Blake (1757–1827). As he tersely complained around 1808 in his *Annotations to Sir Joshua Reynolds' Discourses*, "Reynolds's opinion was that Genius may be taught & that all pretense to Inspiration is a Lie & Deceit, to say the least of it."⁸ Blake belonged to a different generation than Reynolds'; now, the essential, new component becomes the routine exaltation of "Genius."⁹

The New Exaltation of "Genius"

Since the term had already appeared in the English language around 1500, and then as the equivalent of *ingenium* ("native talent"), certainly the eighteenth century did not invent the idea of "Genius." Alongside the doctrine of "Inspiration," the need for *ingenium*—native talent or endowment—had been recognized in antiquity. Pindar, one of the most lyrical of poets as well as a great craftsman, had insisted again and again that craftsmanship is not enough; a poet must also have natural talent (*phua*), and that *donum Dei* cannot ever be taught. In an often quoted passage from the *Poetics*, Aristotle seems to have preferred the "well-endowed" (*euphuēs*) poet to the one who composes in the frenzy of inspiration: "For the former kind are adaptable, the latter [are merely] unbalanced." The context of this remark is, however, the argument that a dramatist should be able to experience

⁷ Ibid., 76–77.

⁸ Blake, as in Eitner, *Neoclassicism and Romanticism*, I, 122; see also p. 103, with contemporary reports of Blake's "conversations with demons and angels," with these causing him "to work like one possessed."

⁹ On this mythic concept, besides Zilsel, *Entstehung des Geniebegriffes*, see Murray, *Genius*.

within himself a wide variety of emotions, and this helps him to visualize scenes most vividly, as if they were set “before the eyes”; so equipped, he is now able to write convincingly.¹⁰

The question later posed was whether “genius” and “talent” differ in kind, or only in degree. Rather than something *sui generis*, or differing in kind, those writers who followed the empirical tradition of Hobbes regarded “genius” as an exceptional, but natural, endowment or unusual talent. For instance, John Dennis (1657–1734), whose outlook had affinities with that of Longinus, states that genius is the capacity for emotional expression, “passion” in short. In his *Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry* (1701), Dennis catalogues the traits which contribute to excellence in poetry, and he defines *genius* as follows: “The first [principle] is Nature, which is the foundation and basis of all. For Nature is the same thing as Genius, and Genius and Passion are all one. For Passion in a Poem is Genius, and the power of exciting Passion is Genius in a Poet.”¹¹

As we shall now see, a great deal was written about “genius” in the second half of the eighteenth century. John Armstrong (1709–79), a physician and poet, states that genius “may be said to consist of a perfect polish of soul, which receives and reflects the images that fall upon it, without warping or distortion.” Whereas talent and ability may be either native or acquired, genius was regarded as *inborn*, as in *genere, gignere*, “to beget.” Later, in his famous essay on *Hereditary Genius* (1869), Sir Francis Galton used the term in the strictly “hereditary” sense of “mental abilities,” and in a prefatory chapter to the second edition of his book he regretted that he had not instead chosen the title “Hereditary Ability.”¹² Others, however, who were more in keeping with the emerging Romantic outlook, regarded genius as something distinct.

In his aptly named *Essay on Genius* (1774), Alexander Gerard states that genius “is confounded not only by the vulgar, but even sometimes by judicious writers, with mere capacity. Nothing, however, is more evident than that they are totally distinct. . . . Genius is properly the faculty of invention; by means of which a man is qualified for making new discoveries in science or for producing original works of art.” Hence, *genius* now becomes essentially linked with “originality.”

¹⁰ Aristotle, as in Osborne, *Aesthetics and Art Theory*, 206.

¹¹ Dennis, in *ibid.*

¹² Armstrong and Galton, as in *ibid.*

Kant, who restricts *genius* to the domain of "fine art" in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), calls it the "masterful originality [*meisterhafte Originalität*] of the natural endowments of an individual." In his book on *Philosophie en France*, François Ravaisson (1813–1900) states that it is "in invention, above all, that one sees that force and grandeur of spirit to which in our day we give the name 'genius.' All agree that genius consists above all in inventing, creating." Thus a new conception of "genius" and the new valuation placed upon "originality" were linked closely together.¹³

At the same time, and rather in the manner of the "Saturnine temperament" attributed to artists in the Renaissance (and as discussed in Chapters 3 and 4), there appeared a fairly well-defined notion of "the artistic genius" as a *psychological type*. This idea of an *innate* psychic predisposition towards artistic genius was much in favor among the Romantics. According to the fully worked out description, a person so endowed had an abnormally strong sense of vocation, was one who labors under an obsessive feeling of compulsion, one which is expressed in an anguished need to realize latent capacities—to "be oneself"—or to discover some transcendental and inexpressible truth which can only be embodied in a chosen art form. Compulsive striving for self-expression, the search for "rightness," harassing doubts, and intensive relief resulting from successful achievement, have all since come to be regarded as the standard "symptoms" of creative genius.

Specifically, the eighteenth century initially inherited the traditional view of "poetic genius," meaning the kind which depends upon external, or muse-derived, "inspiration." However, besides becoming ever less inspired by the Muses, an "external" source, poetic *genius* was now also commonly said to function ever more independent of the "rules of art." Once licensed a "genius," a man so favored (but scarcely ever a woman) was ever more permitted to be negligent of the perfection of his craft and could even turn his back to traditional knowledge. Overall, the decisive shift is from external to *internal Inspiration*. In short, the new trend is toward increasing *subjectivity*, psychic internalization. Put in another way, the metaphorical balance of cultural values tips from the rules of "reason," and down to the internalized dictatorship of feelings, pure emotionality.

¹³ Kant, Gerard, and Ravaisson, as in *ibid.*, 207.

The broader context explaining this momentous shift in the ascribed location of inspiration—from an external to an *internal* source, a location which itself defines a uniquely “modernist” conception of artistic creativity—is best understood as a sociological phenomenon. In short, for the first time in history the middle class had taken over the intellectual leadership of European culture.¹⁴ By the middle of the eighteenth century, the urban bourgeoisie had become so well-to-do and influential that it could afford a literature and art of its own and, through its patronage of the arts, the middle class tried to make its own individuality felt. According to the optimistic self-image projected by the bourgeoisie, practical and self-made businessmen for the most part, they are endowed with common sense, endurance and practical inventiveness; thrown upon their own resources, they create prosperity, security, and law and order out of nothing. Whereas wealth was formerly immobile and tied to landed property, from around 1760 onwards, the dynamic industrial undertaking becomes a popular form of liquid capital investment. Increasingly, more money—power—was put into the hands of the daring entrepreneurs than was then made available to the landed aristocracy. In short, the traditional economic tables had been turned, decisively so.

In particular, the rising middle class created a new system of cultural patronage, that of the commercial market place, and, since around 1780, the independent publisher becomes the new cultural mediator. The commercial book factory responding to its new markets with their mass demands is just another facet of the Industrial Revolution with its mass consumption of manufactured goods and expedient organization of specialized labor. For the first time, the creative product becomes a commodity, more manufactured goods, and now the targeted audience is the general public, a heterogeneous body completely unknown to the author-creator. This was a faceless public, one whose attention had to be immediately roused and captivated by the most effective (or business-like) means. The great demand is now for either popularized historical instruction or for moralized literary entertainment. The general public mostly preferred entertaining works, dramatic escapism, the kind which directly stirred their mostly repressed emotions and bourgeois sentiments.

¹⁴ For the arguments following, see Hauser, *Social History of Art*, III, ch. 2, “The New Reading Public.”

Such readers and spectators were always moved by the stirring and exciting episode, especially when that dramatized event became introverted; all the narrative encounters are focused upon the immediate effect, on surprise and stupefaction. All such effects stimulate the emotions. Marketable, meaning efficient, authors earned considerable sums; besides achieving material independence, they also garnered fame, celebrity. The same holds true for twenty-first-century celebrity-authors, just more so.

As shaped by contemporaneous competition in the marketplace, now for the first time the ideal of the wholly autonomous, creative personality arises. As characterized by Edward Young in his *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759), the artistic genius is known as much for both his originality as for his subjectivity. Modern economic notions began with the introduction of the principle of *laissez-faire*, and the notion of individual freedom first establishes itself alongside the ideology of economic liberalism. The artists' increasing desire to express their subjective feelings is a phenomenon contemporary to the principle of free mercantile competition and the right of personal enterprise and individual initiative in commerce. Individualism is also a protest against a sense of mass depersonalization, and just as that distinctively modernist emotion—"alienation"—was first massively experienced in eighteenth-century factories. Not surprisingly, the creative efforts resulting from patronage by this middle-class, the kind priding itself upon its sensibility and subjective sense of truth and intimacy, posited a revolt of the emotions, and this *emotionality* was implicitly contrasted to a reserve and coldness of the intellect attributed to the ever more discredited, for being considered "unproductive," aristocracy. Arnold Hauser explains the larger effects:

Artistic creation, which was [formerly] a clearly definable intellectual activity, based on explicable and learnable rules of taste, and for both courtly classicism and the enlightenment, now appears as a mysterious process derived from such unfathomable sources as *divine inspiration*, blind *intuition* and incalculable *moods*. For classicism and enlightenment the *genius* was a higher intelligence bound by reason, theory, history, tradition and convention; for pre-romanticism and the "Storm and Stress," he becomes the personification of an ideal characterized, above all, by the lack of all these ties. The *genius* is rescued from the wretchedness of everyday life and put into a dream-world of boundless freedom of choice. Here he lives not merely free from the fetters of reason, but in possession of mystic powers which enable him to dispense with ordinary sense experience. . . . This overstrained subjectivism, which

has been called, not without justification, an “excess of bourgeois frenzy,” could, naturally, only arise in a relatively free bourgeois world, one independent of the class morality and solidarity of the aristocracy and dominated by the spirit of free competition.¹⁵

Some contemporary eyewitness accounts of these momentous trends may now be cited. The modernist-subjective position was early enunciated by, among others, by J. G. Sulzer in his four-volume *Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste* (1771–4, “A General Theory of the Fine Arts”). As he states, the basis for the art of poetry (*Dichtkunst*) solely “is to be sought in the genius of the poet.” When the poet finds himself in the still-obligatory state of *enthusiasm*,

His thoughts and feelings irresistibly stream out in speech [and] he turns all his attention to that which goes on in his soul, and so he forgets the outer circumstances which surround him. . . . The poet is [then] put into a passion, or at least into a certain mood, by his object. He can not resist the violent desire to utter his feelings; he is *transported*. . . . He speaks, even if no one listens to him, because his feelings will not let him be silent. . . . The only thing that matters is the artist. Hence, except in his art, he feels none of the blissfulness of life; absorbed in his instrument, he only lives therein, with all his feelings and powers. As for the gape-mouth public—and once it has finished gaping, and if it can then justify why it has gaped—what difference does that [awed reaction] make?¹⁶

However, by eventually eschewing the traditional notion of a “divine” (or otherworldly and external) origin of *inspiration*, the significant contribution of the eighteenth century was instead to attribute the power of genius to “natural,” or *innate*, powers of cognition. In contemporary portraiture, “innate creativity” was commonly represented as an internalized “inspiration” characterized by rising intensity, expressing itself with increasing urgency (and somewhat in the manner of a pressure-cooker). In fact, eighteenth-century portraits of creative genius (for instance, Duplessis’s portrait of Gluck) frequently revert to an odd iconographic precedent: the formula of “The Saint in Ecstasy” (as was shown in an exemplary fashion by Bernini: **fig. 10**).¹⁷ *Ecstasy* represents, in short, the meaning of “Inspiration” for the Baroque

¹⁵ Ibid., III, 119–20 (emphasis mine).

¹⁶ Sulzer, as in Abrams, *Mirror and the Lamp*, 88–90.

¹⁷ So observed in Yolton, *Blackwell Companion to the Enlightenment*, 188–89 (entry for “Genius”).

era.¹⁸ This perhaps unexpected thematic alignment clearly tells us that the status of "Genius" in the Enlightenment and Romantic periods is comparable, indeed inseparable, to that belonging to "the Saint" in the Baroque period. This makes perfect sense, since form follows cultural function: the modern Creative Genius is a secular Saint. The correspondence is aptly illustrated in Thomas Medwin's description of his cousin Percy Bysshe Shelley while he was composing inspired poetry: "His eyes flashed, his lips quivered, his voice was tremulous with emotion. A sort of *ecstasy* came over him [as in **fig. 10**], and he talked more like a spirit or an angel than a human being."¹⁹

Although the Enlightenment added a new twist—as it was stated by Reynolds (among others), no artist can attain to great poetry or art without knowledge of the rules or conventions attached to both the visual and the verbal arts—paradoxically it was this period, which so often passes for the "Age of Reason," which first minted the Romantic concept of Genius. In short, *l'homme de génie* (the man of genius) of the Enlightenment was represented as a man (but scarcely ever a woman) inspired "by nature," lost in profound thought and, especially (and once again), fired by "Enthusiasm." But the position of the Enlightenment regarding this last trait was equivocal; whereas *Enthusiasm* was considered necessary for poetry, it was thought to work dangerous effects in both religion and, especially, politics, just as was demonstrated during the French Revolution.²⁰

According to our previous analysis, *Inspiration*—as personified by "Bacchus," and as he had been recast either by Ficino, Pico, or by Michelangelo (**fig. 1**)—had come to represent in a compact fashion the kind of collective ambitions eventually making possible a uniquely modern conception of "Art" (capitalized, and in both senses). Broadly viewed, this is prefigured by the Kantian notion that art is an immediate, and unique, representation of *individual* human expression, a subjective bias which is still very much with us today. The emerging modern perspective on artistic "originality," for which "genius" now also seems essential—and without which it is supposed that

¹⁸ For a standard discussion of the appearance and modes of saintly "Ecstasy" after the Renaissance, see Mâle, *L'Art religieux de la fin du XVI^e siècle, du XVII^e siècle et du XVIII^e siècle*, chapter 4, "La Vision et l'Extase."

¹⁹ Medwin, as in Harding, *Anatomy of Inspiration*, 21 (emphasis mine).

²⁰ For a thorough exposition of the eighteenth-century position, see Knox, *Enthusiasm*.

there certainly results no significant (“exemplary”) artistic creativity—was precociously formulated, but at some length, in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1790):

Genius is the talent (or natural gift) which gives the rule to Art. Since talent, as the innate productive faculty of the artist, belongs itself to Nature, we may express the matter thus: Genius is the innate mental disposition (*ingenium*) through which Nature gives the rule to Art. . . . Beautiful [or otherwise “great”] Art is only possible as a product of Genius.

We thus see that (1) genius is a *talent* for producing that for which no definite rule can be given; it is not a mere aptitude for what can be learnt by a rule. Hence *originality* must be its first property. But, since it also can produce original nonsense, (2) its products must be models, i.e. *exemplary*. Consequently, they ought not to spring from imitation, but must [instead] serve as a standard or [future] rule of judgment for others. (3) It [genius] cannot describe or indicate scientifically how it brings about its products, but it gives the rule—just as nature does,

Hence, the author of a [creative] product, for which he is indebted to his *genius*, does not know himself how he has come by his ideas. [Moreover] he has neither the power to devise the like at pleasure or in accordance with plan, nor can he communicate to others the precepts that will enable them to produce other [original and exemplary] products. Therefore, it is probable that the [modern] word “genius” is derived from [the Latin term] *genius*, signifying that peculiar guiding and guardian spirit given to a man at his birth, from whose suggestion these original Ideas proceed. (4) By the medium of genius, Nature does not prescribe rules to Science, but [only] to Art; and to it only in so far as it is to be beautiful Art.²¹

Kant’s observations celebrating “Genius”—even the kind quite unaware of “how it comes by its ideas”—were, however (and as we previously observed, in chapter 6), preceded by Alexander Gerard’s *Essays on Genius* (1774), and Gerard likewise celebrated the essentially supernatural workings of an artistically inspired “imagination.” This faculty, besides being truly breathtaking, fiery, incandescent, and even nearly self-consuming, was also assumed to be unpredictable, even “supernaturally inspired”:

Imagination darts amongst it [the poet’s thinking] with great rapidity; and by this rapidity its ardour is more inflamed. . . . Its motions become still more impetuous, till the mind is enraptured with the subject, and

²¹ Kant, *Selections*, 417–19.

exalted into an ecstasy. In this manner, the fire of genius, like a divine impulse, raises the mind above itself, and by the natural influence of imagination actuates it, as if it were supernaturally inspired.²²

The actual evolution from unconscious or chance perceptions to the fully formed mental image was often given a three-stage evolution; as Giambattista Vico put it in his *Scienza nuova* (1725), "Human beings sense at first without noticing it; next they register [impressions] with a mind that is perturbed and agitated; finally, they reflect upon these with pure intellect [*finalmente riflettono con mente pura*]."²³ Something similar was said by Mozart, who found that his best musical inspiration arose like dreams, that is, quite independent of his will. As he explained in a letter to a friend, his creative gift came from without, that is,

When I am, as it were, completely myself, entirely alone, and of good cheer—say, traveling in a carriage, or walking after a good meal, or during the night, when I cannot sleep. It is on such occasions that ideas flow best and most abundantly. Whence and how they come, I know not; nor can I force them. . . . Nor do I hear in my imagination the parts successively, but I hear them, as it were, all at once. . . . The committing on paper is [later] done quickly enough, for everything is already finished; and it rarely differs on paper from what it was [previously] in my imagination.²⁴

And no one forgot Plato, who was consistently given credit as being the founder of the idea of "supernatural inspiration" Since it also reveals the essential connection with Dionysus-Bacchus, we may again cite Shelley's commentary on the passage in *Ion* (534 B–C), where the venerable Bacchic connection even foreshadows the "possessed"—also implicitly "automatist"—procedures of twentieth-century poets and painters (with one such shown in **fig. 22**):

The authors of those great poems which we admire [says Shelley] do not attain to excellence through any rules of art, but [instead they] utter their beautiful melodies of verse in a state of inspiration and, as it were, possessed by a spirit not their own [and they thereby] create those admired songs of theirs in a state of divine insanity, like the Corybantes, who lose all control over their reason in the enthusiasm of the sacred dance; and during this supernatural possession they are

²² Gerard, as quoted in Abrams, *Mirror and the Lamp*, 191.

²³ Vico, as in Heckscher, "Petites Perceptions," (and including the Italian text).

²⁴ Mozart, as in Watson, *Beyond Supernature*, 73.

excited to the rhythm and harmony which they communicate to men. . . . Whilst a man retains any portion of the thing called reason, he is utterly incompetent to produce poetry or to vaticinate. . . . The God seems purposely to have deprived all poets, prophets and soothsayers of every particle of reason and understanding, the better to adapt them to their employment as his ministers and interpreters.²⁵

Written five years after Shelley's *In Defense of Poetry*, the wholly "automatist" argument—even including a precocious reference to "chance" (à la Marcel Duchamp)—was first made explicit by William Hazlitt in his 1826 essay, "Is Genius Conscious of Its Powers?" As he then made plain, but only by taking considerable liberty with his historical subjects,

The definition of genius is that it acts unconsciously; and those who have produced immortal works [or so Hazlitt claims] have done so without knowing how or why. . . . Correggio, Michael Angelo, Rembrandt, did what they did [he specifically asserts] without premeditation or effort. Their works came from their minds as a natural birth. If you had asked them why they adopted this or that style, they would have answered, *because they could not help it*. . . . Shakespeare himself was an example of his own rule, and he appears [according to Hazlitt's wholly subjective reading] to have owed almost everything to chance. . . . The true inspiration of the muse leaves us little to boast of, for the effect hardly seems to be our own.²⁶

The extreme claimant for poetic automatism was—that is, before André Breton coined the term "*l'automatisme psychique*"—William Blake. In 1803, as Blake tersely explained the composition of his "Milton,"

I have written this Poem from immediate Dictation, twelve or sometimes twenty or thirty lines at a time, without Premeditation and even against my Will; the Time it has taken in writing was thus rendered Non Existent, and an immense Poem exists which seems to be the Labour of a long Life, [but as] all produced without Labour or Study.²⁷

The conclusions separately reached by Shelley, Hazlitt, and Blake represent the later, rather radical, stage in an extended historical

²⁵ Shelley, as quoted in Osbourne, *Aesthetics and Art Theory*, 201–2; see further T. Clark, "Orientations." Again we may identify the source for this observation as *Ion* 534 B–C (as in *Great Dialogues of Plato*, 18–21), where Plato concluded that "it is not by any art or science [that great Poetry is produced], but instead by divine dispensation and possession."

²⁶ Hazlitt, as in Abrams, *Mirror and the Lamp*, 215 (Hazlitt's emphasis).

²⁷ Blake, in *ibid.*

evolution. Previous to the middle of the eighteenth century, the reigning view (for instance, Reynolds') had held that art is properly the product of acquired knowledge and skill. After that date, however, increasingly stressed was the importance of a wholly contrary factor: *unconscious drives*. And as was to be emphatically declared much later by the Surrealists, total subordination to those "unconscious drives" is the proper goal of any soi-disant modern artist, so explaining the central *vanitas vanitatem* of nearly all twentieth-century concepts of artistic "creativity." However, in the pre-Freudian age, that is, two centuries ago, what we now blithely call "unconscious drives" (*unbewusste Treiben*) were instead collectively labeled, and by reverting to traditional usage, *inspiration*. Moreover, in the late eighteenth century its principle cause was said to be "natural genius." One so "naturally" endowed—for instance, an artist or poet—is then driven by inner necessity; happily ignorant of "the rules," and indifferent to society, he creates as the tree bears fruits. According to this biological metaphor, thus his genius-ridden works were said to have the qualities which are found in nature's authentic creations: organic unity and life. Such is the "vegetable" picture drawn for us in Edward Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759), also including a direct reference to the otherworldly "divine afflatus":

An Original [work] may be said to be of vegetable nature; it rises spontaneously from the vital root of *genius*; it grows, it is not made. Imitations [to the contrary] are often a sort of manufacture, wrought up by those mechanics, art and labour, out of pre-existent materials not their own. . . . Modern writers have a *choice* to make; and therefore [they] have a merit [with]in their power. They may [either] soar in the regions of liberty, or [merely] move inside the soft fetters of easy imitation. . . . A genius differs from [just] a good understanding, as a magician [differs] from a good architect; that [genius-magician] raises his structure by means invisible; this [the mundane builder who erects it] by the skillful use of common tools. Hence genius has ever been supposed to partake of something divine. *Nemo unquam vir magnus fuit, sine aliquo afflatu divino* [no man was ever great without some degree of divine inspiration].²⁸

However, for being an author more widely read than Young, much more influential were the "un-teachable" conclusions reached by Johann Kaspar Lavater, and as recorded in his *Physiognomische Fragmente*

²⁸ Young, "Conjectures," 216–17, 219.

(1775–8). After rhetorically proposing his initial query—“What is genius?”—he then informs us:

Where there is effectiveness, power, action, thought and feeling, [but] which cannot be learned or taught, there is *genius*. The most apparent and the least describable thing, it is *felt*, but [it remains] unspoken, like love.

The characteristic of genius and of all its creations is, in my opinion, *apparition*. Like the apparition of an angel, it comes not, but is suddenly present; it leaves not, but is gone. Like the apparition of an angel, it moves us to the marrow; its immortality rouses the immortality in us. It vanishes, but continues to act after it is gone, leaving us in sweet trembling, in tears of fright, and the pallor of joy. . . . Call it fertility of mind [or] call it elasticity of the soul or senses and of the nervous system, which, alert to all impressions, reacts to them with a rapid charge of vital individuality. Call it inherent, natural energy of the soul; call it [simply] creative power. . . .

[Genius is] that which has not been learned or borrowed, that which *cannot* be learned or borrowed; it is the intimately individual, the inimitable. The divine is genius, [and] *the inspired is genius*, and it is called genius by all nations, in all periods, and it will be called thus and so long as men think, feel and speak.

Genius flashes, genius creates. It does not contrive; it creates! Just as it cannot be contrived, it but simply exists. Inimitability is the characteristic of genius. Instantaneity, revelation, apparition, being: [Genius is] a gift not of man, but of [either] God or Satan.²⁹

Appearing slightly later, Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790) provided a more extensive, also more moderated, discussion of the essential components of the evolving notion of the wholly self-created, also unknown, “artistic genius”:

Every one is agreed that genius is entirely opposed to the spirit of imitation [or *mimesis*]. Since learning is nothing but imitation, it follows that the greatest ability and capacity to be taught cannot avail genius. . . . We can never learn how to write imaginative poetry, however well enunciated may be the precepts of that art, and no matter the excellence of its [authorized] models. . . . The poet [of genius] cannot show how his Ideas, so rich in fancy and yet so full of thought, come together in his head; this is simply because he does not know, and therefore he cannot teach others [the trick]. . . . Again, artistic talent cannot be communicated; it is [only] imparted to every artist immediately by the

²⁹ Lavater, as in Eitner, *Neoclassicism and Romanticism*, I, 87–88 (emphasis mine on “inspired genius”).

hand of nature. Therefore, it dies with the artist—until nature endows another in the same way, so that [the new artist] only needs an example in order to put into operation in a similar fashion the [infused] talent of which he is [only now] made conscious. . . .

Mechanical and beautiful [or "great"] arts are very different; the first ["mechanical art"] is a mere art [or technique] of industry and learning, and the second ["beautiful art"] is [the product] of genius. Nonetheless, there is no beautiful art in which there is not a mechanical element that can be comprehended by rules and followed accordingly. . . . The originality in the talent constitutes an essential (though not the only) element in the character of genius. . . . Genius can only furnish rich material for the products of beautiful art; its [physical] execution and its form require talent cultivated in the [vocational] schools. . . .

In an aesthetic sense, *Geist* ["spirit," or imagination] is the name given to the animating principle of the mind[.] it is the counterpart, or pendant, of a rational *Idea*. . . . The Imagination, working as a productive faculty of cognition, is very powerful in creating, as it were, another nature . . . something different, [a "heterocosm"] which surpasses nature. . . . Genius awakens [the creative person] to a feeling of his own originality, whom it stirs so to exercise his art in freedom from the constraint of rules. Thereby a new rule is gained for art, and thus his talent shows itself to be exemplary.³⁰

"Genius" and "Inspiration" Among the Romantics

Kant was a man of the Age of Enlightenment. This cultural peculiarity is shown particularly by his realization that potential artistic "talent [must first be] cultivated in the [vocational] schools." After Kant, however, there came the Romantics; for them, talent was exclusively cultivated in the emotions. For them, "Genius" certainly partook of Lavater's apparition-like and convulsive, or semi-orgasmic, "sweet trembling," and as likewise characterized by sudden gusts of "revelation." Thus art had ceased to be a trade or a profession; henceforth, it was to be considered a vocation, "a calling," like that to the priesthood. Albert L. Guérard neatly sums up the new conditions such as they prepared the way for *l'art pour l'art*, "art for art's sake":

³⁰ Kant, *Selections*, 419–21, 425–6, 431.

Romanticism implies a belief, not in any set of external rules, but in direct, personal *inspiration*. Imagination and passion are no longer forces to be brought under the discipline of traditions and reason. Whatever the artist does see or feel with sufficient intensity is *ipso facto* true. Hence the Romantic emphasis upon such terms as “the sublime,” “enthusiasm,” “genius,” which all imply a refusal to conform. The claims of art were thus immeasurably extended; indeed no upward limit was any longer recognized. . . . The premise of romantic humanitarianism was a “Poetocracy.” The true poet is he who *feels* more intensely within himself the collective soul; who, by reading it, brings it to consciousness. *Inspiration, expression, creation*, [perceptual] *leadership*, are moments in the same divine process. The poet is the *vates*, the soothsayer, in whom is first heard that voice which is both of the people and of God.³¹

This is a momentous invention, a cultural hybrid concocted by the Romantics which I call the “Artist-Priest-Prophet” (and which is further discussed—and documented—in chapter 9). Noting the historical novelty of art making which “began to confer upon the artist the attributes of a seer and a prophet,” Jacques Barzun explains the complementary chain of events allowing for the unprecedented phenomenon.

In sum, it required the Renaissance glorification of man, the scattering and weakening of creed by the Protestant Reformation, and the general unbelief caused by the progress of science. . . . The consequences of this [historic] shift for the artist and society have been many and incalculable. The artist as genius, seer, and prophet was no longer subordinate to the beholder and consumer of art. They exchanged places, at first in theory only, but more and more effectually, until by now everybody concedes that it is the artist who has the right to be *demanding*. We sit at his feet to learn; no pains are too much, his oracle being often obscure. Always “ahead of his time,” he leads mankind.

Barzun also recognizes the emotional benefits arising from the proto-modernist, pseudo-theology:

Like other religions, *the religion of art* promised the individual not only the peace of harmonized feeling and understanding, but also the bliss of spiritual ecstasies. For Wordsworth and Goethe, Beethoven and Berlioz, Turner and Delacroix, great art—including their own work—produced all the effects of religious fervor: enthusiasm, awe-struck admi-

³¹ Guérard, *Art for Art's Sake*, 34–35, 52. For a more detailed examination of such concepts among the Romantics, see T. Clark, *Theory of Inspiration*.

ration, raptures and devoutness. Great artists constituted the Communion of Saints. Walter Scott, hardly an extravagant mind, writes in his *Journal* that love of the great masters is "a religion or nothing." . . . During and after the great drama of the French Revolution it was impossible to maintain the elegant cosmopolite detachment of the *ancien régime*. Artists could no longer think of themselves as entertainers or craftsmen serving the leisured. They were now [instead] the [autonomous] interpreters of life. . . . The reality seen through art is [now] equivalent to that which religion formerly brought within the reach of man. Both [art and religion] redeem man from selfishness and the commonplace. Both ensure a passionate excitement that is spiritual and therefore permanent.³²

Evidence for the proto-modernist *religious* experience of "creative inspiration" was early exhibited in the writings of Wilhelm Wackenroder (1773–1798). Just as his contemporaries also came to believe increasingly, the short-lived Wackenroder held that true art spontaneously arises from intense feelings—and not from any conscious mastery of the artist's craft. As a complementary dictum, Wackenroder reverted to the ancient notion of "divine" inspiration, with that premise stating that the ability to create is a special grace, that it is like a seed laid by the hand of God into the artist's soul. For Wackenroder, it is his very openness to inspiration which raises the artist above ordinary men. These self-aggrandizing themes appear in Wackenroder's youthful script, *Herzensergießungen eines kunstliebenden Klosterbruders* ("Outpourings from the Heart of an Art-Loving Friar," 1797). Here the sensitive "Art-Loving Friar," who must have also read Plato,

finds in every work of art, in every part of the world, a trace of that heavenly spark which went out from Him, through the breast of man, into man's own, lesser creations, from which it sends its gleam back to the great Creator. . . . Universal, original beauty, which in moments of ecstatic vision we may name, but which we can never explain in words, is only revealed to Him Who created both the rainbow and the seeing eye. I began my discourse with Him and I now return to Him, just as the spirit of art, and just as all spirit emanates from Him.³³

Another notoriously "inspired," German writer was Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775–1854). His *Natur-Philosophie* was derived from both Kant and a notoriously mystical, earlier writer, Jacob

³² Barzun, *Use and Abuse of Art*, 27, 33, 76.

³³ Wackenroder, as in Eitner, *Neoclassicism and Romanticism*, II, 21, 22.

Boehme (1575–1624). Since Schelling's writings were later eagerly consumed by William Coleridge (among others), his gospels eventually spread throughout the English-speaking world. As did Boehme, Schelling held that, although quite invisible to you and I, a single "creative spirit" pervades both the physical work and (even) the individual consciousness. Not even conscious of itself, this numinous figment operates blindly in Nature. However, once the Spirit infuses itself into man, he becomes consciously productive, hence evolves into an artist. According to Schelling's thesis, art requires operation of both the conscious and the unconscious mind. Nonetheless, the real source of the artist's creativity—"the eternal sun in the realm of the mind"—is *unconscious* energy. Sharing the trait of unconscious energy with Nature, the artist is now driven to produce art, even against his will.

As was explained in Schelling's influential essay of 1807, *Über das Verhältnis der bildenden Künste zu der Natur* ("Concerning the Relationship of the Fine Arts to Nature"), true artistic insight uniquely belongs "to the inspired seeker alone."

Art expresses spiritual thoughts, conceptions, whose source is the soul. It does so not only by speech but, like silent nature, by shape, by form, by corporeal, independent works. Art, therefore, evidently stands as a uniting link between the soul and nature. . . . But what should this broad general proposition profit the artist, when the notion of nature is of such various interpretation, and where there are almost as many differing views of nature as there are various modes of life? Thus, to an [uninspired] person, nature is nothing more than the lifeless aggregate of an indeterminate crowd of objects. . . . To the inspired seeker alone is given a view of the holy, ever-creative, original energy of the world, that which generates and busily evolves all things out of itself. . . . Only he has the spiritual eye to penetrate thorough the veil, and so he [alone] feels the stirring energy within.³⁴

In his *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen* (1810), Schelling further elaborated his view that, considered in isolation from both the soul and God, *madness* is "the most profound essence of the human mind." To reinforce his assertion he then cited the famous axiom by Seneca announcing the laudable "de-braining" of the creative artist:

³⁴ Schelling, as in *ibid.*, II, 43–45.

Madness, therefore, does not come into being but it [instead] appears when that which is actually non-being, i.e., without reason, is actualized—when it seeks to be essence, being. The basis of understanding itself is, therefore, madness. . . . What we call understanding, if it is real, lively, active understanding, is actually nothing but regulated insanity. . . . People who have no madness in themselves are people of empty, unfruitful understanding. Hence the inverted sentence: *nullum magnum ingenium sine quadam dementia*. Therefore, [this is] the divine madness of which Plato speaks, of which the poets [also] speak.³⁵

Hence, and once again, "madness" is said to provide an access to privileged poetic knowledge. There were, however, dissenting opinions regarding *inspiration*. One of those belonged to the British landscape painter John Constable (1776–1837). Reverting around 1836 to Reynolds' argument, the one holding that no painter can attain to great art without knowledge of the rules or conventions attached to the visual arts, Constable observed how, "In such an age as this, painting should be *understood*." Clearly disdaining the mystical "spiritual eye" argument of the Schelling clique, Constable affirms that painting must be instead treated as learned pursuit, indeed as a *science*; it should

not be looked on with blind wonder, nor [should it be] considered only as a poetic aspiration, but [instead only] as a pursuit: *legitimate*, *scientific*, and *mechanical*. . . . Painting is a science, and should be pursued as an inquiry into the laws of nature. Why, then, may not landscape painting be considered as a branch of natural philosophy, of which pictures are but the [linked] experiments?³⁶

Constable's argument is, of course, still valid; in fact, it may now even be identified (perhaps somewhat paradoxically) as the basis of much forthcoming avant-garde art. Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863) was a great admirer of Constable's work, which he called, in 1823, "admirable, quite incredibly fine," adding, in 1824, that "Constable did me a world of good."³⁷ Writing in 1849, Delacroix's broader opinion was that "Science is art itself. On the other hand, art is not what the vulgar believe it to be, that is, a vague *inspiration* coming

³⁵ Schelling, as in Ziolkowsky, *German Romanticism and Its Institutions*, 205.

³⁶ Constable, as in Eitner, *Neoclassicism and Romanticism*, II, 65 (his emphasis).

³⁷ Delacroix, *Journal*, 16 (entry for 9 Nov. 1823), 47 (19 June 1824).

from nowhere, moving at random and portraying merely the picturesque, external side of things. It is [instead] pure *reason*, embellished by genius, but following a set course and bound by higher laws.”³⁸ As is well known, by following in his lead, the French Impressionists later treated their landscape paintings as so many linked scientific (or repeatable) experiments dealing with the effects of *plein air* optics. Moreover, half a century later, the French Cubists approached their still-life compositions as representing a series of inter-linked pictorial experiments dissecting spatial-temporal relationships.

But rationality was only a minority opinion among “creative” artists and writers in the first half of the nineteenth century. Gifted with retrospection, in 1852 Delacroix observed, “I remember that, in the past, an artist’s enthusiasm and imaginative powers were supposed to be at their height. . . . We have [however] become completely mature, now that age has stilled the mad, impetuous passions of our youth [and now] we enjoy work for its own sake.”³⁹ “In the past,” yet another element, again mostly unprecedented, had been added by the Romantics to the expanding menu of artistic mythologizing: *psychic suffering*. This self-pitying motif is, of course, still current in the modernist artist’s public self-portrait; this topos is displayed in, for instance, mass-market movies portraying such self-immolating artistic martyrs as Vincent Van Gogh (**fig. 12**) and Jackson Pollock (**figs. 22, 23**).⁴⁰

The short-lived painter Théodore Géricault (1791–1824) set to paper in his last years some random observations about the state of art in France. The major part of the preserved manuscript fragment involves, beside a diatribe against academic training, Géricault’s exaltation of *la génie*, itself a contributing factor to the artist’s mostly self-induced trials and tribulations:

The obstacles and difficulties which repel mediocre men are a necessity and nourishment of genius. They mature and elevate it, when in an easier road it would have remained cold. Everything which opposes the irresistible advance of genius irritates it, and gives it that fevered exaltation which conquers and dominates all, and which produces mas-

³⁸ Delacroix, *ibid.*, 97 (7 April 1849); my emphasis on the opposition put between “inspiration” and “reason.”

³⁹ Delacroix, *ibid.*, 163 (12 Oct. 1852).

⁴⁰ See Walker, *Arts & Artists on Screen*, esp. 40–48, exposing the mythic liberties meretriciously taken in “Lust for Life.”

terworks. Such are the men who are their nation's glory. External circumstance, poverty, or persecution will not slow their flight. Theirs is like the fire of a volcano which absolutely bursts into the open, because its nature absolutely compels it to shine, to illuminate, to astonish the world. Do you hope to produce men of this race? The Academy, unfortunately, does more than that: it extinguishes those who, to begin with, had a spark of the sacred fire; it stifles them by keeping nature from developing their faculties at its own speed. By fostering [superficial] precocity, it spoils the fruit which would have been made delicious by a slower maturation.⁴¹

Géricault's longer-lived contemporary was Delacroix. In the *Journal* he kept throughout his professional career he once had occasion to pose the question "What is the source of all genius?" By his much earlier reckoning (in 1824),

I think it is imagination alone—or what amounts to the same thing, a delicacy of the senses—that makes some men see where other are blind or, rather, which makes them see in a different way. I say that [unfortunately] even *great passions joined to imagination usually lead to a disordered mind*. . . . Fundamentally, what makes a man outstanding is his absolutely personal way of seeing things. . . . Hence, [there are] no rules whatsoever for the greatest minds; those are only for people who merely have talent, which can be acquired. The proof is that genius can *not* be transmitted.⁴²

Goya, Schopenhauer, and the "Suffering Genius"

Although Delacroix had only made a passing reference in 1824 to the artist's "disordered mind," a trait then taken to be native to his overheated, creative "imagination," the idea was already widely broadcast. Through close readings of Baudelaire, Brentano, Flaubert, Hölderlin, Poe, Rimbaud and others, Wolfgang Lange has recently demonstrated how the notion of a deliberately contrived or "calculated madness" (*kalkulierte Wahnsinn*) was at the figurative center of creative practice throughout the nineteenth century.⁴³ In any event, the idea of the poet's "contrived madness" is truly ancient. According to Horace, perhaps its earliest advocate was Democritus, and his

⁴¹ Géricault, as in Eitner, *Neoclassicism and Romanticism*, II, 101.

⁴² Delacroix, *Journal* (entry for April 27, 1824), 35 (emphasis mine).

⁴³ See Lange, *Der Kalkulierte Wahnsinn* (passim).

prescription then gave birth to a kind of “beatnik” poet (*mais bien avant la lettre*). As may be read in the *Ars Poetica* (295–301),

Because Democritus believes that innate genius [*ingenium*] is a greater boon than is impoverished art, and because he excludes from Helicon all sane poets [*excludit sanos Helicone poetas*], a goodly number of these now take no pains to cut their nails or to shave off their beards. They haunt lonely places and shun bathing [*secreta petit loca, balnea vitat*]. Surely no one will ever win the esteem attached to the title of “poet” [*pretium nomenque poetae*] if he had a head that cannot ever be cured [*caput insanabile numquam*].

Again, the key term was “Genius,” and William Vaughan explains that the Romantic artist now saw himself as “a hero in his own right; and one who claimed the prerogative of independent action. Behind the concept of [his] heroic genius lay that belief that it was man’s innate gifts that were to be valued above all else.”⁴⁴ Evermore, the artistic mission of *l’homme de génie* is particularly to explore *his* inner reality, and this psychic reconnaissance is presented to us in a series of images that become increasingly incomprehensible to the degree that they become evermore private, and so inherently evermore subjective—and, eventually, even functionally autistic. According to a complementary proposition firmly established in the time of the Romantics, the modern artist nobly suffers and works in isolation (and just as was recommended by Democritus long, long before). Painful creative isolation seems something like a new ingredient in the increasingly heated argument of a *Querelle des anciens et des modernes* initially installed in the seventeenth century. With our recently enhanced historical hindsight, we now recognize this need among *les modernes* for psychic withdrawal as “old hat,” just another shopworn legacy from late fifteenth-century Florentine Neoplatonists, by whom the martyred *topos* of artistic estrangement was first advanced as constituting an absolutely essential component of “melancholic creation,” *artificiosis melancholia*.

Nonetheless, the Romantics treat the topic as though it were newly minted psychic coinage. Moreover, they volubly justify their self-declared social isolation—which trait is, in practise, as though they had voluntarily committed themselves to an asylum of the imagination—as an inevitable consequence of their newly found artistic inde-

⁴⁴ Vaughan, *Romanticism and Art*, 66.

pendence. In this sense, Benjamin Constant's comment of 1816 is archetypal: "*L'indépendance [artistique] a pour conséquence l'isolement.*" Later, Alphonse de Lamartine spoke of the illness of his time, "*cette maladie qu'on appelle génie.*" In 1835, Heinrich Heine waxed maudlin over the theme of the inevitable loneliness and self-inflicted melancholy which must attend the life-style of great creators working under the duress of artistic genius: "The history of great men is always a martyrology: when they are not sufferers for the great human race, they suffer for their own greatness."⁴⁵

The topic of madness also fascinated visual artists. William Hogarth created one of the best known images of the madhouse in the engravings of his popular series *The Rake's Progress* (especially the plate illustrating "The Rake in Bedlum," 1732–33). Other notable British examples include Henry Fuseli's engraving of "The Madhouse," which was prepared for the English edition of Lavater's *Essays in Physiognomy* (1792), and Thomas Rowlandson's *The Hospital for Lunatics* (1789). This "Bedlam iconography" also provides the cultural context allowing for the bizarre work of Franz Xaver Messerschmidt (1736–1783), particularly for his unparalleled series of sixty busts of "Madmen," all cast in lead and including self-portraits. Francisco Goya was also notoriously drawn to the topic of the insane asylum, and a notable example is his documentary-like rendering of *The Yard of the Madhouse at Zaragoza* (1794).⁴⁶

Today, surely the best known pictorial (versus verbal) summary of the artist's "disordered mind" is found in a widely circulated print designed by Francisco Goya y Lucientes (1746–1828), and aptly called "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters" (*El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*). (fig. 17) By examining this etching in its various cultural contexts, Folke Nordström defined it as an up-dated rendering of the Renaissance concept of *Melancholia artificialis*, the "artificer's melancholy."⁴⁷ This literally nightmarish image depicting the contemporary artist's "calculated madness" can also be taken to represent the definitive statement on the mostly deleterious effects now

⁴⁵ Constant, Lamartine and Heine, as quoted in Honour, *Romanticism*, 256, 258.

⁴⁶ This list of characteristic works by various artists is given in Ziolkowski, *German Romanticism and Its Institutions*, 153; for the broader literary contexts, see especially his Chapter 4, "The Madhouse: Asylum of the Spirit." For many more contemporary illustrations, see Gilman, *Seeing the Insane*.

⁴⁷ See Nordström, *Goya, Saturno y melancolía*, 141–60, "El capricho no. 43."

attributed to “Inspiration” following the soi-disant Age of Enlightenment and Reason. The inscription for the preparatory sketch of 1797 (in the Prado) tersely explains that the engraving depicts: “The artist [Goya] dreaming. His only purpose is to banish harmful, vulgar belief, and to perpetuate in this work of *Caprichos* the solid testimony of truth”—“*El autor soñando / Su yntento sólo es desterrar bulgaridades / perjudiciales, y perpetuar con esta obra de / caprichos, el testimonio sólido de la verdad.*”⁴⁸ While the equally “melancholic” and “inspired” artist dreams, so losing his reason, his unchecked imagination becomes overshadowed by flying night creatures, bats, owls, and a wide-eyed lynx. The overall significance of the print is tersely explained in another handwritten commentary by Goya: “Abandoned by reason, fantasy produces impossible monsters. United to reason, fantasy is the mother of the arts and the source of marvels”—“*La fantasía abandonada de la razón produce monstruos imposibles: unida a ella es madre de las artes y origen de las maravillas.*”⁴⁹ Hence, by the author’s own statement, the key issue is *fantasía*.

The statement most closely paralleling the phraseology of Goya’s inscription—“*La fantasía abandonada de la razón produce monstruos imposibles: unida a ella es madre de las artes y origen de las maravillas*”—is to be found in the once-celebrated *Essay on Genius* (1759, with later editions) by Alexander Gerard. Here the Scot defined genius as the faculty “by means of which a man is qualified for making new discoveries in science, or for producing original works of art.” As he further observed (and I emphasize here the part later to be echoed by Goya),

A perfect judgment is seldom bestowed by Nature, even on her most favored sons; but a very considerable degree of it always belongs to real genius. It may be remarked in the most incorrect and irregular artists; even when it has not force enough to discern every fault, or when the violence of imagination is too great to suffer it to be exerted with sufficient severity, yet still it prevents perfect absurdity, and restrains imagination from frantic excursions. Pindar is judicious even in his

⁴⁸ For the historical contexts of Goya’s term “capricho,” as representing “Arbeiten ohne Vorbild und ohne Rücksicht auf die Natur,” see Martin Warnke’s useful investigation of the “Chimären der Phantasie,” as reprinted in his *Nah und Fern zum Bilde. Beiträge zu Kunst und Kunsttheorie*, 259–77.

⁴⁹ For the recognized literary sources of this initially enigmatic print, see (besides Nordström) the able summation by López Vázquez, *Los Caprichos de Goya y su significado*, 166–76. The other quotations given by me here represent new materials within the interpretive canon.

irregularities. The boldness of his *fancy*, if it had been under no control from reason, would have produced, not wild sublimity, but madness and frenzy.⁵⁰

Late in 1792, and as due to an unknown illness—however most likely plumbism, or lead-poisoning⁵¹—Goya, like Beethoven, became deaf and introspective, also clinically and chronically depressed. The other classic symptoms of *plumbism*, as documented in his correspondence, include nausea, partial paralysis and blindness, dizziness, tinnitus, impaired balance, mental confusion, and hallucinations. This recurrent physical condition was probably instrumental in causing Goya, as he himself noted in his advertisement for the *Caprichos*, increasingly to “make observations for which commissioned works generally have no room, and in which fantasy and invention have no limit.” In the broader sense, Goya’s art provides a microcosmic, but emotionally magnified and “terrible,” vision of the collapse of an utopian optimism informing the Age of Reason and Enlightenment, earlier foreshadowed in Alexander Pope’s problematic query put in his *Imitations of Horace, Epistle II* (1737):

With terrors round, can reason hold her throne,
Despise the known, nor tremble at the unknown?
Survey both worlds, intrepid and entire,
In spite of witches, devils, dreams and fire?⁵²

Among many other characteristic images, Goya’s outraged (and endlessly reproduced) print showing how *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* almost seems an illustration to Pope’s prophesy of the dethronement of Reason in the face of “witches and devils.” This is but one of a series of 84 images, each singular in its own right, making up the set called the *Caprichos* which was finally put on sale in February 1799. According to the advertisement written by the artist, his principal intention was “the censorship of human errors and vices,” and historians have remarked how well Goya’s explicitly moralizing, even acerbic, content fits in with that produced by contemporary social reformers in Spain, including Padre Isla, Padre Feijoo, Villarroel, and the editors of a journal fittingly called *El Censor*. As

⁵⁰ Gerard, as in Becker, *The Mad Genius Controversy*, 26 (emphasis mine). I cannot find any notice of a contemporary translation of Gerard’s *Essay on Genius* into Spanish.

⁵¹ See Moffitt, “Painters ‘Born Under Saturn’: The Physiological Explanation.”

⁵² Pope, as in Levey, *Rococo to Revolution*, 10.

they all understood, madness (*la locura*) represents a deprivation of reason (*la razón*); the Latin roots are the prefixes *in* (without) and *de* (removed), as in *insania* (un-healthy), *insipientia* and *desipientia* (passive and active foolishness), *amentia* (brain-less), and *dementia* (literally meaning “de-brained”).⁵³

However, and as previously noted, according to Goya’s declaration, the central issue presented in his print depicting “The Sleep of Reason [which] Produces Monsters” is *la fantasía*, and this in turn provokes the peripheral effects of his *Melancholia artificialis*. Accordingly, we need to consider briefly the Renaissance understanding of creative “phantasy,” and this is provided in an extended definition given in *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589) by George Puttenham. According to this author,

If the evil and vicious disposition of the brain hinders the sound judgment and discourse of man with busy and disordered phantasies, for which cause the Greeks call him *phantastikos*. If that part [of the brain], being well affected, not only nothing disorderly or confused with any monstrous imaginations or conceits, but [is instead] very formal, and in his much multiformity [is] uniform, that is, well proportioned, and so passing clear, [then] by it, as by a glass or mirror, are represented unto the soul all manner of beautiful visions, whereby the inventive part of the mind is so much helped so that, without it, no man could devise any new or rare thing. . . .

And this phantasy may be resembled to a glass, as has been said, whereof there be many tempers and manner of makings, as the [treatises on] perspectives do acknowledge, for some be false glasses [that is, *anamorphoses*] and [they] show things otherwise than they be indeed, and others [are] right as they be indeed, neither fairer nor fouler, nor greater nor smaller. There be again of these glasses [some] that show things exceeding fair and comely; others that show figures very monstrous and ill favored. Even so is the fantastical part of man (if it be not disordered) a representer of the best, most comely, and beautiful images or appearances of things to the soul and according to their very truth. If otherwise, then does it [phantasy] breed chimeras and monsters in man’s imagination, and not only in his imagination but also in all his ordinary actions and life which ensues. Whereof such persons as be illuminated with the brightest irradiations of knowledge and of the verity and due proportion of things, they are called by the learned men not *phantastici* but *euphantasioti*, and of this sort of phantasies are all good Poets . . .⁵⁴

⁵³ So noted in Stoichita, *Goya: The Last Carnival*, 145.

⁵⁴ Puttenham, as in Osborne, *Aesthetics and Art Theory*, 215 (I have modernized the spelling).

Admittedly, Puttenham's treatise seems a rather obscure source and, more importantly, Goya could not read English. But Puttenham is merely repeating the statement given in an ancient text which, besides being popular in Spain in Goya's time, had been familiar to all the Renaissance humanists. In short, the *locus classicus* for Goya's essentially rhetorical understanding of the negative effects of *fantasía*, including its production of "chimeras and monsters in man's imagination," was most likely Quintilian. As one reads in the *Institutio oratoria* (VI, 2),

The first essential is that those feelings should prevail with us [performing as rhetoricians] that we wish to prevail with the audience, and that we should be moved ourselves before we attempt to move others. But how are we to generate those emotions in ourselves, since emotion is not in our power? I will do my best to explain. There are certain experiences which the Greeks call *phantasias*, and the Romans *visiones*, whereby things absent are presented to our imagination with such extreme vividness that they seem actually to be put before our very eyes. It is the man who is really sensitive to such impressions who will have the greatest power over the emotions. Some writers describe the possessor of this power of vivid imagination, whereby things, words and actions are presented in the most realistic manner, by the Greek word *euphantasiotos*, and it is a power which all may readily acquire if they will. When the mind is unoccupied or is absorbed by the fantastic hopes of daydreams, we are haunted by these visions. . . .

Surely, then, it may be possible to turn this form of hallucination to some profit. I am [for instance] arguing that a man has been murdered. Shall I not bring before my eyes all the circumstances which it is reasonable to imagine must have occurred in such a connection? Shall I not see the assassin burst suddenly from his hiding-place, the victim tremble, cry for help, beg for mercy, or turn to run? Shall I not see the fatal blow delivered and the stricken body fall? Will not the blood, the deathly pallor, the groan of agony, the death rattle, be indelibly impressed on my mind? From such impressions arises that *enargeia* which Cicero calls illumination and actuality, which makes it seem not so much to narrate as to exhibit the actual scene, while our emotions will be no less actively stirred than if we were present at the actual occurrence . . .⁵⁵

Goya's demon-ridden image (**fig. 17**) may also be usefully related to a facet of the Renaissance tradition of the "demonic arts," with this aspect holding that dreams are like paintings.⁵⁶ The argument

⁵⁵ Quintilian, as in *ibid.*, 235–36.

⁵⁶ What follows, although Goya is never mentioned by the author, derives from Michael Cole's discussion of "The Demonic Arts and the Origin of the Medium."

was framed by René Descartes in his *Meditationes de prima philosophia*. Here he states that, when “we are dreaming,” what is “seen in sleep is like painted images [*quasdam pictas imagines*].” However, “painters themselves, even when they aim, with the most extraordinary forms, to represent sirens and satyrs, they cannot assign them natures that are in every way new, but can only mix the members of different animals.” Here Descartes clearly has in mind the fantastic hybrid described in Horace’s *Ars Poetica* (vv. 1–5). Nonetheless, “if by chance they should conceive something so novel that nothing similar has ever been seen before, something that is, therefore, wholly fictitious and false, it is at least certain that the colors by which they composed this image must be real.” Then Descartes likens such fantastic visions to demonic possession, that is, when “some evil spirit, one that is at once exceedingly potent and cunning, has set all of his industry to deceiving me. I will then imagine that the sky, air, earth, colors, figures, sounds, and all external things are nothing other than the mockeries of dreams [*quam ludificationes somniorum*], by means of which this [demonic] being seduces my credulity.”⁵⁷

Earlier, in his treatise *De Lamiis* (1586), Johannes Weyer had also recalled the famous Horatian motto in order to liken the painter’s art to demonic activities. He affirmed that the *lamias* (or witches) can “turn people into animals, and otherwise show and accomplish thousands of marvelous, foolish things, as poets mendaciously relate and write, according to the saying [by Horace]: ‘*Pictoribus atque Poetis quidlibet audendi semper fuit aequa potestas*’.” However, Weyer next mis-translated the Latin to read (in German) “Good painters and poets hold that all that they finely write and paint must be true and right”—“*Die Maler und Poeten gut, vermeynen gantz in ihrem Gemüth es müß als gelten und recht seyn, was sie dichten and mahlen fein*.”⁵⁸ A similar linkage between painters and demons was advanced by Francesco Cattani da Diacceto in his *Discorso sopra la superstizione dell’arte magica* (1567). In short, “One of the things demons can do is operate in bodies that appear to be human or some kind of animal, with the likeness of this body consisting in its figure and in its color. The [demonic] figure is induced by means of local motion, just as do painters [*onde i pittore*] by means of brushes and other instruments to color their

⁵⁷ Descartes, in *ibid.*, 621.

⁵⁸ Weyer, in *ibid.*, 636.

[imagined] bodies."⁵⁹ In his *Compendio dell'arte essorcistica* (1576), Girolamo Menghi stated that, since a demonic apparition, *il Diavolo* himself, "is nothing other than the depiction of a body," all made "with local motion [*il moto locale*]," then this may also be likened to "the art of painting, since, using local motion, painters make their figures" similarly.⁶⁰

Returning to the topos of the "inspired" Romantic artist's "disordered mind" (as shown in **fig. 17**), we find that it was only later to be formulated in writing. An early appraisal of the baleful condition of conjoined unhappiness and loneliness, which were then taken to be the nearly inevitable companions of "creative genius," appeared in Heinrich Heine's *Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland* (1834):

Even though it encounters no malignant enmity from without, genius will be sure to find within itself an enemy ready to bring calamity upon itself. This is why the history of great men is always a martyrology. When they are not sufferers for the great human race, they suffer for their own greatness, for the grand manner of their being, for their hatred of philistinisms, for the discomfort they feel among the pretentious commonplaces; they suffer for the mean trivialities of their surroundings. Theirs is a discomfort that readily leads them into extravagances.⁶¹

As the same idea had been expressed by Goya some thirty-five years before: "Fantasy abandoned by Reason produces impossible monsters." By 1834, clearly Reason had abandoned Fantasy to its own devices, and those now mostly produced—besides "extravagances"—creative, hence mostly self-inflicted, *martyrdom*.

The classic, full-length, statement regarding the *insania*, *insipientia* and *desipientia*, *amentia* and *dementia* taken to be native to "artistic genius" first appears in that famous, half-sad and half-cynical, monumental catalogue of *Weltschmerz* composed by Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Verstellung* (first appearing 1819, with a definitively expanded version in 1844, and declaiming "The World as Will and Representation"). Perhaps better than any other writer, Schopenhauer (1788–1860) had eloquently represented that world-weariness and all-pervasive sense of loneliness which is implicit in so much of the

⁵⁹ Cattani, in *ibid.*, 623.

⁶⁰ Menghi, in *ibid.*, 623.

⁶¹ Heine, as in Honour, *Romanticism*, 256–58.

Romantic movement. In his view, our ideas provide no access to any world beyond our sense perceptions. The self-generated (and self-deceiving) *Wille*—and not the intellect—is the root of all that we regard as “real”—but it is, alas, a malignant force which, at every turn, frustrates the spiritual life of man. As he put it (and in so doing, he anticipated Kafka), “However much we investigate, we can never reach anything but images and names. We are like a man who goes around a castle, seeking in vain for an entrance, and sometimes sketching the façades.”

Schopenhauer is precociously “modern.” Particularly modern is his unprecedented philosophical grasp of the sub-rational, with his perceptual autopsy showing the unconscious-volitional life of mankind as an inescapable by-product of the all-pervasive “will,” which is so clearly anticipatory of Freud’s essentially pseudo-scientific probing of the “*Unbewusste*” (unconsciousness). In the event, after Schopenhauer there has been irretrievably lost the ancient notion of an *external*, even supernatural or specifically “divine,” Other Being as the source of “inspiration.” Now the source is wholly *interior*, within the autonomous, subjective and literally mundane, individual *Wille*.

For Schopenhauer, the only release from volition, *Wille*, comes through the contemplation of art. As it turns out, those individuals best equipped to benefit from “pure contemplation”—*geniuses*—belong to a very exclusive club.

Art is [exclusively] the work of genius. It repeats or reproduces the eternal [Platonic] Ideas grasped through pure contemplation, [seizing] the essential and abiding in all the phenomena of the world. . . . The Idea comes to us more easily from the work of art than directly from nature and the real world. The artist, who knows only the Idea and no longer the real world, reproduces in his work the pure Idea; he abstracts it from the actual world, omitting all disturbing accidents. The artist lets us see the world through his eyes. That he knows the inner nature of things apart from all their [accidental] relations is the gift of genius, which is itself inborn. . . . Most men entirely lack objectivity, which is to say genius. . . . Art, as a whole, belongs only to the true man of genius, he who so rarely appears. . . .

The consolation which art affords us [arises from] the enthusiasm of the artist, with that enabling him to forget the cares of life; this is an advantage of the man of genius over all other men. . . . For that which we might otherwise call the most beautiful part of life, its purest joy—if it were only because it lifts us out of real [mundane] existence and transforms us into disinterested spectator of it—is pure knowledge. This is foreign to all willing. The pleasure of the beautiful, the true

delight in art, this is granted only to a very few. This [boon] is granted only to a very few because it demands rare talents, and even to these few [it] only [appears] as a passing dream.⁶²

As we read here, the privileged ones, "those few," are all necessarily *geniuses*. Moreover, "the method of genius is only valid and of use in art." Genius is itself at times rather an awesome endowment, for it "is like the mighty storm, that rushes along without beginning and without aim, bending, agitating, and carrying away everything before it." Otherwise, for Schopenhauer,

Genius is the faculty of continuing in the state of pure perception, of losing oneself in perception, and of enlisting in this service the knowledge which originally existed only for the service of the will. Genius is the power of leaving one's own interests, wishes, and aims entirely out of sight. Hence, genius is entirely renouncing one's own personality for a time, so as to become a pure, knowing subject, with clear vision of the world. . . . Because man [in general] is at once just an impetuous and blind striving of the will (whose pole or focus lies in the genital organs), then the eternal, serene subject of pure knowing (whose pole is the brain) is the antithesis [of ordinary, non-genius, perception].⁶³

Alas, even here, in this desirably "will-less" aesthetic habitat, dangers still lurk. Particularly it is Schopenhauer who should be credited as the founder of the specifically modern myth of the "mad artist." Here is how he developed his thesis of alienated, essentially psychotic, inspired creativity:

The activity of men of genius rises even to disquietude, for the present can seldom satisfy them, because it does not fill their consciousness. This gives them that restless aspiration, that unceasing desire for new things, and for the contemplation of lofty things. This longing is hardly ever satisfied for men of genius. Those with similar nature and like stature, to whom they might [wish to] communicate themselves. To the contrary, the common mortal, who is entirely filled and satisfied by the common present, remains in it and, finding everywhere his ilk, he enjoys that peculiar satisfaction in daily life that is denied to genius. . . .

The highest artistic achievement is the representation of the *terrible* side of life: the unspeakable pain, the wail of humanity, the triumph

⁶² Schopenhauer, as in Edman (ed.), *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*, 155, 161, 164, 193, 213, 255 (in the interest of greater clarity, in the citations following I have broken up Schopenhauer's multi-sub-clause sentences into smaller units.).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 155–56, 169.

of evil, the scornful mastery of chance, and the irretrievable fall of the just and innocent. Such is the nature of the world and of existence. It is the strife of the will with itself [;] then knowledge, purified and heightened by suffering, reaches the point at which the worldly phenomena, the veil of Maya, no longer deceive. . . . The complete knowledge of the nature of the world then produces resignation, the surrender not merely of life, but of the very will to live. . . .

The consolation which art affords us [arises from] the enthusiasm of the artist, with that enabling him to forget the cares of life; this is an advantage of the man of genius over all other men. This alone repays him for the suffering that increases in proportion to the clearness of his consciousness, and for the desert loneliness attaching to men of a different race. All this rests upon the fact of the *Ding-an-sich* (thing in itself) of life, of will, of existence itself. All this is, as we shall see, a constant sorrow, partly just miserable, partly terrible. On the contrary, only the Idea, as purely contemplated or as copied by art, is free from pain [;] the will remains itself in constant suffering. . . . The basis of all willing is need, deficiency, and thus pain [;] its life swings like a pendulum backwards and forwards between pain and ennui. . . .

All those who have attained to complete denial of the will have experienced that which has been variously denoted by the names *ecstasy*, *rapture*, *illumination*, *union with God*, and so forth. Unfortunately, since this state is only attainable in one's [unique] experience, it cannot be further communicated.⁶⁴

In the end, the reader is left with little doubt but that Schopenhauer considered himself, besides "inspired" (and so experiencing "*ecstasy*, *rapture*, *illumination*, *union with God*, and so forth"), a "genius." A complementary conclusion is that he was also a snob, the alienated sort given over to self-pity.

Nietzsche's Moment of Involuntary Epiphany

Nonetheless, that ancient tradition of inspiration as "*ecstasy*, *rapture*, *illumination*, *union with God*, and so forth" was, in fact, "further communicated" by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) in his autobiographical *Ecce Homo* (1888). As he then explained his very own, personal experience of *Inspiration*,

⁶⁴ Ibid., 156–57, 196–97, 213–14, 252, 333–34. For more on the nineteenth-century exaltation, also "pathologization," of "suffering genius," see Neumann, *Mitos de artista*, chapter 3 (which pointed me toward Schopenhauer).

The concept of revelation—in its particular sense of something suddenly perceived with unspeakable certainty and subtlety, when one sees and hears something, something which moves and transforms a person in the most profound way—simply describes the reality of facts. It is heard, but it is not sought; it is taken, but one does not question who is the giver. It is a ray which lights up thought, with necessity, and without vacillation in its form. I have never had any choice [in its reception].

It is an ecstasy whose enormous tension is released at times in a torrent of tears. Sometimes, the process starts involuntarily and, at other times, slowly. It is being completely outside of one's self, and with a most clear consciousness of numberless fears and as accompanied by a quivering which reaches to one's toes. It is an abyss of joy, one in which the most painful and dark effects do not act as an antithesis. . . .

It all happens in a totally involuntary manner, but as accompanied by a torment of feelings concerning freedom from constraint, with sensations of power, of divinity. . . . The involuntary nature of the image, of the symbol, is the most worthy of attention. . . .

This has been my experience of *inspiration*. I have no doubt but that it would be necessary to go back millennia in time in order to find somebody who would rightly claim: "This, too, was my experience."⁶⁵

Nonetheless, this "ecstatic" explanation went against Nietzsche's earlier conclusions. For instance, in the undated fragment, *Aus der Seele der Künstler und Schriftsteller* ("From the Soul of the Artist and Writer"), he pointed out how advocates of supposedly passively received inspiration conveniently "have to discount the sweat and labor" involved in creating any work of art. In short,

Artists have a vested interest in believing in the sudden suggestion, meaning in so-called "inspiration." This holds that the idea for the work of art or poetry, or the basic idea for a philosophy, comes down suddenly and then lights up everything, much like a halo of grace descending from heaven. . . . If the productive force has been blocked for a period, and if its flow has been inhibited by an obstacle, there is later such a sudden release, seeming to be by immediate inspiration—but by ignoring all the preliminary interior cogitation—that it might seem to result from a miracle. This explains the familiar illusion, which the majority of artists now maintain. Instead, capital has simply been accumulated; it does not fall all at once from the heavens.⁶⁶

In this work, only to be posthumously published, Nietzsche reveals a previously hidden aspect of himself, that is, as a covert deconstructor

⁶⁵ Nietzsche, as in Neumann, *Mitos de artista*, 137–38.

⁶⁶ Nietzsche, as in *ibid.*, 136–37.

of clichéd ideas of intuitive creativity. Another who took this position, and much earlier, was (perhaps surprisingly) Edgar Allen Poe. As he complained in his essay on “The Philosophy of Composition” (1846),

Most writers—poets in especial—prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy—and ecstatic intuition—and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes, at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of [creative] thought, at the cautious selections and rejections—at the painful erasures and interpolations—which, in nine-nine cases out of the hundred, constitute the [real] properties of the literary *histrion* [or theatrics].⁶⁷

Thus, we broadly see how the concept of Inspiration had evolved since the time of the Renaissance. Overall, the pattern inexorably shifted from an *external*, typically “divine,” passive infusion of energy towards an *internal*, wholly subjective, active chain-reaction of intense creativity. Another way of expressing the shift is by a metaphor: the Mirror versus the Lamp.⁶⁸ The earlier bias was for *mimesis*, by which the artist passively “mirrors” Nature; in the alternative version, *expressionism*, the artist actively “illuminates” the nature of Nature by means of the incandescent “inner light” of his innate Genius. After observing how “the modern poet’s concentration on his own ego is bound up with a humorless over-estimation of his every personal utterance,” Arnold Hauser then neatly places this refulgent metaphor within the larger historical context informing the various materials examined in this chapter.

The romantics believed in a transcendental, world-pervading spirit as the source of poetic inspiration and identified it with the spontaneous creative power of language. To allow oneself to be controlled by it was considered by them to be the sign of the highest artistic genius. Plato had already spoken of the “enthusiasm,” of the divine inspiration of poets, and the belief in *inspiration* had always appeared on the scene whenever poets and artists had wanted to give themselves the appearance of a priestly caste. But this was the first time that inspiration had ever been regarded as a self-kindling flame, as a light that has its source *inside* the soul of the poet himself.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Poe, as in Clark, *Theory of Inspiration*, 1.

⁶⁸ For a complete exposition of the metaphor, see M. H. Abrams’s classic study on *The Mirror and the Lamp*.

⁶⁹ Hauser, *Social History of Art*, III, 209–10.

As we now understand, fueled by *Inspiration*, the over-heated, priest-like, creative "Genius" was ever more perceived to function as did another modernist invention, the internal-combustion engine. In a similar fashion, so too was Dionysus-Bacchus re-configured for the post-Enlightenment age. And, as shall be shown in the next chapter, much of the credit for the restitution of Dionysus as the allegorized embodiment of modernist Inspiration goes to Friedrich Nietzsche.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A DIONYSUS REBORN FOR THE SYMBOLIST ERA

The Dionysus of Friedrich Nietzsche

For some time, perhaps two-and-a-half centuries following the Renaissance, Bacchus largely appears to have lost his preeminent status as a symbolic representative of the concept of “Poetic Inspiration.” Nonetheless, it has been argued by Lilian Feder that a more broadly defined “Dionysiac element,” that is, “as a symbol of psychic renewal through the dissolution of the self,” can be credibly traced throughout much of post-Renaissance letters.¹ In any event, even though usually without any useful acknowledgment of its original sources in Renaissance thought, clearly the poetically intoxicated *Bacchus* fabricated by Quattrocento Neoplatonism, and as physically embodied in Michelangelo’s eloquently drunken exemplar (**fig. 1**), undergoes a dramatic metaphorical resurrection late in the nineteenth century. Nearly all of the most significant ground-work necessary for the creation of a strictly “modernist Dionysus,” particularly the one later to be exalted by the French Surrealists, had been laid down by Friedrich Nietzsche. Born in 1844, he—with a certain poetic, even “Dionysiac,” grandeur—went drastically insane in 1889, and was to remain confined in an asylum until his death, in 1900.

The literary cornerstone of a newly erected, post-Renaissance, Bacchic edifice is Nietzsche’s epic recreation of *Die Geburt der Tragödie, oder Griechenthum und Pessimismus* (“The Birth of Tragedy, or Hellenism and Pessimism”), first published in 1876 (the citations following come from the text of a revised edition of 1886).² In one particularly

¹ For this argument, see Feder, *Madness in Literature*, particularly Chapters 4 and 5, making useful mention of “Dionysus as a pervasive symbol of German Romanticism,” especially in the writings of Winckelmann, Hamann, Herder, and Schelling; see also Bäumer, “Nietzsche and the Tradition of the Dionysian”; Foster, *Heirs to Dionysus*.

² I am here following the English version of *The Birth of Tragedy* given by Walter Kaufmann; for J. C. F. Hölderlin and Heinrich Heine, Nietzsche’s immediate predecessors in Dionysiac reveries, see Butler, *Tyranny of Greece over Germany*, 229–34, 286–300. For the context of the quotations following, see Baeumer, “Nietzsche and

striking passage, and as put at the very beginning of his Dionysiac discourses, Nietzsche affirms that “in the creation of *dream-worlds* every man clearly becomes an artist”; moreover, such universally accessible dream-worlds constitute “the requisite of all visual art” and poetry as well. Thus for Nietzsche, and likewise for so many of his Symbolist contemporaries, *der Traum* represents the real source of all significant poetry and painting, and in this way the standard Renaissance notion of *Ut Pictura Poesis*, signifying that “Painting aspires to the condition (and prestige) of Literature,” has now evolved, in the Symbolist era, into a new notion, “*Ut artis somnia*.”³

Nietzsche also made explicit to his many readers that such artistic-poetic “dreams” directly represent creative “intoxication.” More to the point, this metaphorical state of inebriated creative reverie specifically recreates “the nature of the Dionysiac experience,” and such as it is predicated upon “blissful ecstasy.” Obviously, these observations certainly parallel closely, perhaps even proved to be an essential impetus to, those well known *rêveries* so notoriously propelling the creative efforts of so many poets and painters active during the Symbolist epoch. In a narrower context, likewise Nietzsche’s comments explain much of a strictly “artistic” cultural background contemporaneously impelling the oneirocritical imagery inspiring Sigmund Freud’s epochal study, first published in 1900, of *Die Traumdeutung* (“The Interpretation of Dreams”).⁴

Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* begins as follows (“First Section,” also including the author’s frequent italicized emphases):

the Tradition of the Dionysian”; Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, see also Feder, *Madness in Literature*, esp. 204–13.

³ For the Renaissance notion, see Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis*; the second title, “*Ut artis somnia*,” is, of course, my invention, but for the fact, now amply documented, of a widespread fascination with “dreams” in the Renaissance, see Gandolfo, *Il “Dolce Tempo”*.

⁴ Given that Sigmund Freud had published his seminal work *Die Traumdeutung* (“The Interpretation of Dreams”) in 1900, the post-modernist art historian has license to see him essentially as yet another Symbolist theoretician discussing *le rêve* as constituting an essential key to deciphering the *états d’âme*; for Freud’s immediate Symbolist cultural context, the “Wiener Sezessionstil,” see the massive survey edited by Jean Clair, *Vienne 1880–1938*; for Freud’s aesthetics, see Gombrich, “Les théories esthétiques de Sigmund Freud,” *ibid.*, 355–67; for much more detail, see Spector, *The Aesthetics of Freud*. The closest functional precedents for Freud’s “modernist” *Traumdeutung* may be found in a medieval pseudo-science called *oneiromantia* (“dream-interpretation”), with its own desk-top published *Traumbücher* (“dream-treatises”), for which (in specific detail) see Schmitt, “Das Traumbuch des Hans Lobenzweig.”

The continuous development of art is bound up with the *Apollonian* and *Dionysiac* duality—just as procreation depends on the duality of the sexes, involving perpetual strife with only periodically intervening reconciliations. . . . In order to grasp these two tendencies, let us first conceive of them as the separate art worlds of *dreams* and *intoxication*. . . . It was in dreams, says Lucretius, that the glorious divine figures first appeared to the souls of men . . . and the Hellenic poet, if questioned about the mysteries of poetic inspiration, would likewise have suggested dreams, and he might have given an explanation like that of Hans Sachs [as composed by Richard Wagner] in the *Meistersinger*:

*Mein Freund, das grad' ist Dichters Werk,
dass er sein Träumen deut' und merk'.
Glaubt mir, des Menschen wahrster Wahn
wird ihm im Träume aufgethan:
all' Dichtkunst und Poëterei
ist nichts als Wahrtraum-Deuterei.*

[The Poet's task is just this, my friend, to read and record his dreams. The real truth lying behind human delusions are, believe me, disclosed to man in his dreams: all the art informing poetry and versification is nought but a faithful interpretation of dreams.]

Following Wagner's reveries, Nietzsche returns to his own libretto, in which Dionysus has a starring role:

The beautiful illusion [*Schein*] of the dream worlds, in the creation of which every man truly becomes an artist, is the prerequisite for all visual art, and, as we shall see, of an important part of poetry also. In our dreams we delight in the immediate understanding of figures; all forms speak to us; there is nothing unimportant or superfluous. But even when this dream reality is most intense, we still have, glimmering through it, the sensation that it is *mere appearance* [*rein Schein*]. . . .

Schopenhauer has depicted for us the tremendous *terror* which seizes man when he is suddenly dumbfounded by the cognitive form of phenomena [but] if we add to this terror the blissful ecstasy that wells from the innermost depths of man, indeed of nature, at this collapse of the principle of individuation [*principium individuationis*], we steal a glimpse into the nature of the *Dionysiac*, which is brought home to us most intimately by the analogy of intoxication. . . . Dionysiac emotions awake and, as they grow in intensity, everything subjective vanishes into complete self-forgetfulness. . . . Poor wretches have no idea how corpse-like and ghostly their so-called "healthy-mindedness" looks when the glowing life of the Dionysiac revelers roars past them.

As this statement usefully indicates, effectively Nietzsche has reiterated all those linkages earlier established in Renaissance literary theory between Bacchic "creative intoxication" and Dionysiac "blissful

ecstasy.” To the old *topoi*, he now proceeds to add something new. According to the influential mythic metamorphosis wrought by Nietzsche, old Bacchus additionally comes to represent something like a cosmic force. Besides being a liberating element, just as the Renaissance authors had affirmed, Nietzsche’s Dionysus now signifies a transcendent, positive energy. This is the one that reunites Man and Nature, and the ultimate result is a new re-visioning of that lost Golden Age celebrated by pagan authors, and otherwise known to medieval Christians as “Eden.” As was explained by Nietzsche,

Under the thrall of the Dionysiac experience the union between man and man is reaffirmed. Nature, which has become alienated, hostile, or subjugated, celebrates once more her reconciliation with her prodigal son, who is man. . . . Now the slave is a free man; now all the rigid, hostile barriers that necessity, caprice, or impudent convention have fixed between man and man are broken. Now, with the gospel of universal harmony, each man feels himself not only united, reconciled, and fused with his neighbor, but as one with him, as if the veil of illusion [*maya*, a Hindu term popularized by Mme. Blavatsky] had been torn aside and were now merely fluttering in tatters before the mysterious primordial unity. . . . Man is no longer an artist, he has become himself a work of art: in these paroxysms of intoxication the artistic power of all nature reveals itself to the highest gratification of the primordial unity. . . . The Dionysiac world-artist rings out the cry of the Eleusinian mysteries [as rewritten by Schiller]: “Do you prostrate yourselves, millions? Do you sense your Maker, oh world?”⁵

A passage immediately following, Section 2 of Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*, begins by proclaiming a primary modernist artistic doctrine, later named “automatism.” Just as affirmed by some classical authorities, principally Plato, *automatism* had already been described by Nietzsche as occurring “without the mediation of the human artist.” Effectively, this is André Breton’s *l’automatisme psychique*, the same kind of passively creative process also randomly engendering (*par le hasard*) all those marginally artistic “chance-effects” that were later to be so enthusiastically championed—and supposedly invented—by the Surrealists. Nonetheless, Breton’s well known, later, and subsequently widely practised, “psychic automatism” we may suspect to have been due in largely part to the influence of some distinctly

⁵ *Birth of Tragedy* (Kaufmann ed.), 33–37; the italicized terms represent Nietzsche’s emphases.

“occultist” contemporary experiences. We refer to those widely publicized “séances,” producing reams of “automatic writing” and “spirit drawings,” many of which had been widely broadcast slightly earlier in the new mass-media.⁶

In particular, Nietzsche’s previous citation of “*maya*” also suggests that he was himself familiar with esoteric literature, since the term *maya*, as employed to represent the “illusions” presented by the deceitfully phenomenal or “materialist” world, was most notoriously popularized by Madame Blavatsky in her various, widely circulated, Theosophical publications. Of course, neither is our widely influential German philosopher-author going to call the procedure he advocates *la création automatique*, for that was a term only coined much later, in 1924, by André Breton. Instead, in 1886, Nietzsche refers (in italicized phrases and Faulkner-length sentences) to the “Dionysiac” effect as specifically representing:

Artistic energies which burst forth from nature herself, *without the mediation of the human artist*—energies in which nature’s art impulses are satisfied in the most immediate and direct way—first in the image world of dreams, whose completeness is not dependent upon the intellectual attitude or the artistic culture of any single being; and then as intoxicated reality, which likewise does not heed the single unity, but even seeks to destroy the individual, redeeming him by a mystic feeling of Oneness [*Einheit*]. With reference to these immediate art-states of nature, every artist is an “imitator,” that is to say, either an “Apollonian artist” in dreams, or a “Dionysiac artist” in ecstasies. . . . So we may perhaps picture him sinking down into his Dionysiac intoxication and mystical self-abnegation, alone and apart from the singing revelers, and we may imagine how, through Apollonian dream-inspiration, his own state, i.e., his oneness with the inmost ground of the world, is revealed to him in a *symbolical dream image*.⁷

Section 5 of Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* carries his Bacchic dithyrambs to even greater heights. Here Nietzsche speaks of the “drunken outburst of desire,” the kind uniquely belonging to “the first subjective artist,” who thereby paradoxically becomes, as he puts it, “essentially the non-artist.” It is here particularly that one can envision the real

⁶ For many detailed contemporary reports of these séances, and also their production of esoteric “automatic writing” and “spirit drawings,” see Shepard, *Encyclopedia of Occultism*, 76–78, 81, 245, 247, 100–3; see also Deonna, *De la Planète Mars en Terre Sainte*; Flournoy, *From India to the Planet Mars*; Gibbons, “British Abstract Painting of the 1860s.”

⁷ *Birth of Tragedy*, 38; the italics again represent Nietzsche’s emphases.

origins of the equally *automatiste* and *gegenstandlose* reveries of a Wassily Kandinsky or a Jackson Pollack (figs. 22, 23), both of whom probably read Nietzsche. As was explained in 1886 by the auto-intoxicated (*auch ausdrucksvoll*) German philosopher,

In the first place, as a Dionysiac artist, he has identified himself with the primal unity, its pain and contradiction. . . . This artist has already surrendered his subjectivity in the Dionysiac process. The image that now shows him his identity with the heart of the world is a dream-scene that embodies the primordial contradiction and primordial pain, together with the primordial pleasure of mere appearance [:] his passion dances before us in orgiastic frenzy. . . . This [modern] plastic artist, like the [ancient] epic poet who is related to him, is absorbed in the pure contemplation of images. The Dionysiac musician is, without any images, himself pure primordial pain and its primordial re-echoing. This lyric genius is conscious of a world of images and symbols—growing out of his state of mystical self-abnegation and oneness. . . .

Insofar as the subject is the artist himself [i.e., this is already “self-expression”], he has already been released from his individual will, and has become, as it were, the [essentially passive] medium through which the one truly existent subject celebrates his release in appearance. . . . We may assume that we are merely images and artistic projections for the true author, and that we have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art—for it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*. . . . He only knows something of the eternal essence of art only insofar as the genius coalesces with this primordial artist [*Ur-Künstler*] of the world in the act of artistic creation; for in this [transported] state he is, in a marvelous manner, like the weird image of the fairy tale, which can turn its eyes at will and behold himself; he is at once subject and object, at once poet, actor, and spectator.⁸

Also sprach Nietzsche . . .

Dionysus and Orpheus Among the Symbolists

Accordingly, Nietzsche gets the historical credit for reviving the traditional, post-medieval, patterns of an initially dreamy and passive, later intoxicated and dynamically ecstatic, Bacchic “Inspiration.” As it turns out, Nietzsche’s complementary leitmotif of Dionysiac “initiation”

⁸ *Birth of Tragedy*, 48–52; the italics again represent Nietzsche’s emphases.

was also a topic which proved of great interest to literary and artistic theorists in the Symbolist period. Their radical artistic experiments immediately precede, indeed directly herald, the production of some revolutionary pictorial experiments which we now call "Expressionist" and "Cubist." Certainly, "initiation" was additionally a topic which had been often discussed by the Theosophists following in Madame Blavatsky's esoteric footsteps. She, in turn, was influenced (or "initiated") by the likes of Éliphas Lévi, a widely read occultist author, about whom we shall have much more to say. In turn, most of the Theosophists' arguments about "initiation" were, in fact, expanded in an occultist best-seller that was entirely given over to the initiatory topic, Edouard Schuré's *Les Grands Initiés*.

Since its first appearance in Paris in 1889, Schuré's esoteric opus, subtitled "A Study of the Secret History of Religions," has gone through some 220 editions and, by now, has reached an estimated readership of nearly a million people. Besides writers of the poetic sort, many sensitive artists were also eager students of Schuré's initiatory scriptures. According to this widely consumed text, "ancient initiation rested upon a concept of man, both healthier and nobler than ours. We have, today, disassociated the training of the body, soul, and spirit. Our [modern] physical and natural sciences, progressive in themselves, set aside the principles of the soul and its diffusion in the universe; our present-day religion does not satisfy the needs of the spirit."

Again, the major problem—as was also later recognized by, among others, Wassily Kandinsky in his *Ueber das Geistige in der Kunst* (1912)—is with the present age: "Modern man seeks pleasure without happiness," laments Schuré, "happiness without knowledge, knowledge without wisdom. . . . 'In order to attain mastery,' said the sages of the ancient age, 'man needs a total remodeling of his physical, moral, and spiritual being. Only then can he say that he has conquered fate and that here on earth he has acquired his divine freedom. Only then can the initiate become an initiator.'" Schuré concludes by stressing the tangible significance of *initiation*: "Therefore, initiation was, then, something very different from an empty dream, and was, then, far more than a simple scientific precept: it was, then, the creation of a soul through itself, its development to a higher level, and its efflorescence in the divine world."⁹

⁹ Schuré, *The Great Initiates*, 11.

As did Nietzsche, in order to personify, or literally symbolize, both "initiation" and, additionally, artistic "inspiration," Schuré calls forth the ancient example of Dionysus—and also that of Orpheus, his designated spokesman or missionary.¹⁰ According to Euripides, so writing in 406 BC, specifically it is Orpheus, "who will bring dances and Bacchic reveling . . . he will bring the Maenads whirling" (*Bacchae* 561–70). As Schuré later explains, "the theurgic and Dionysiac impulse, which Orpheus knew how to communicate to Greece, was [thereby eventually] transmitted to all Europe." It is Orpheus who, as Dionysus's duly appointed emissary, "beams across the ages with the personal light of a creative genius"; therefore, states Schuré, "the tradition of the initiates, the cry of the poets, the voice of the philosophers . . . testify to his living reality!" His attribute is the "Lyre of Orpheus," a sign of his divinely inspired ability to "sing in brilliant cadences and celestial harmonies." His is an otherworldly instrument, where "each string corresponds to a mood of the human soul and contains the law of a science and an art." This emblematic lyre shows Orpheus to be "the great initiator," for his art is "divine, inspired," so allowing him to be officially designated "the ancestor of poetry and music, conceived as revealers of eternal truth."

The new religion of initiation and creative genius proclaimed by Dionysus's spokesman, Orpheus, "had women as priestesses, with voluptuous rites, a chaotic practice of occult arts and a love of orgiastic excitement." It was these voluptuously esoteric women, "who had taken the name Bacchantes," "who called forth dangerous passions and the blind forces of nature." Orpheus it was who "completely changed the cult of Bacchus and subdued the Bacchantes. . . . Finally, through the creation of the Mysteries, he formed the religious soul of his country. For from the height of initiation, he blended the religion of Zeus with that of Dionysus in a universal concept. . . . In this way, Orpheus became . . . the revealer of the heavenly Dionysus to the initiates."

As Dorothy Kosinski has shown in her magisterial study of *Orpheus in Nineteenth-Century Symbolism* (1989), for most Symbolist poets and artists, Orpheus represented "the archetypal Artist." Such as he was

¹⁰ Schuré, *Great Initiates*, 221 ff., "Orpheus: The Mysteries of Dionysus." The citation from Euripides's *Bacchae* following is derived from Lind (ed.), *Ten Greek Plays*, 330–63. For an excellent discussion of the leit-motiv and cultural context of Euripides's *Bacchae*, and also its subsequent fame and re-employment by later authors, see Feder, *Madness in Literature*, esp. 38–76.

often pictured in Symbolist poetry and painting, this ancient Bacchic emissary concretely personified a timely picture of the otherworldly Artist. Serving in an opportune fashion as a role-model for artists at the turn of the twentieth century, Orpheus evoked the desirable ideal of the “poet-magician, embodying the ideal combination of the arts, the isolated and tormented artist, expressing a conflict between aesthetic idealism and impure earthly imperative.” At the end of the nineteenth century Orpheus becomes a standard symbolic figure, Kosinski explains, “whose art is magical, of divine inspiration, and linked to the obscure dawns of civilization.” Moreover, according to the terms of fin-de-siècle aestheticism, “this multivalent mythical figure of Orpheus seems implicit in many of the most important intellectual and aesthetic currents of the Symbolist period: religious syncretism, decadent pessimism, the androgynous concept, the synaesthetic ideal, Rosicrucian mysticism, occultism, and Wagnerism.”

This resurrected Dionysiac figure represents, in sum, the very root of our modern, and essentially *esoteric*, concepts, “about art, about our notions of the sources of inspiration, the nature of creativity.” In the larger sense, as Kosinski usefully points out, “the major themes which revolve around Orpheus [and thus Dionysus as well] in the Symbolist milieu—the significance of the occult, of the spiritual, the prominence of the theory of correspondences and the synaesthetic ideal, the appreciation of music as the artistic paradigm—all in endure in a significant manner, serving to inform the evolving idealist, non-figurative aesthetic of the twentieth century.”¹¹ In short, it was basically the Symbolist artists and theoretists who initially formulated the principle constituting what we call “modern art,” particularly the kind pursuing an “idealist, non-figurative aesthetic,” and their figurative patron saint was Dionysus and his helpmate Orpheus.

In this way, even though usually not recognized as such, Orpheus and Dionysus became significant instrumental figures, mythic role-models as it were, in an unquestionably decisive art-historical process. All this was leading, with almost Darwinian inevitability, to a now completely institutionalized installation of abstract, even non-repre-

¹¹ Kosinski, *Orpheus in Nineteenth-Century Symbolism*, xi, xv; for Orphic ideas in post-Symbolist, abstract art, see 243 ff. Certainly, just the 160 illustrations in Kosinski's model study would be sufficient to prove the point of an ubiquity of Orphic imagery among the Symbolists and their immediate followers; see also McGahey, *Orphic Moment*.

sentational (“*gegenstandlose*”), painting and sculpture within the standard canon of twentieth-century, modernist art—a menu now also enshrined in the standard curriculums of any postmodernist college art department you might choose to visit. In fact, these Dionysian ideas have even been shown to have affected a distinctly modernist kind of scholarship, *Kunstgeschichte* (“art history”), and particularly its investigative technique called “Iconology.” That methodology was initially inspired by the novel research of Aby Warburg (1866–1929), particularly in his relentless pursuit of the *Pathosformeln* (“pathos formulas”), that is, the rhetorical emotive topoi of the visual artist. More important, the strictly visual (*auch ausdrucksvoll*) expressions of what Warburg called “genuinely ancient formulae of an intensified physical or *psychic expression*” were best exemplified, so he affirmed, by “Dionysian pathos.”¹²

Another obvious bit of textual evidence from this period (“documentation”) is Guillaume Apollinaire’s designation, in his book on *Les Peintres Cubistes* (1912), of a largely non-figurative school of painting as constituting “*Orphic Cubism*.” As defined by Apollinaire, Orphic Cubism is a wholly non-representational art, one ideally displaying pictorial “elements which have not been borrowed from the visual sphere [or ‘real world’], but which have instead been created entirely by the artist himself,” meaning wholly from *within* himself. As summed up by Kosinski,

the key elements of Apollinaire’s Orphism—the theory of correspondence, the [functional] ideal of music, a rejection of the traditional mimetic function of painting in favor of a visual art which communicates an inner, universal meaning corresponding to a higher level of consciousness—are strikingly similar to Kandinsky’s aesthetic theories [and] what is even more apparent is the evolution of Apollinaire’s ideas from the same milieu: Symbolist theory, occult and Theosophical concepts, [sources] that informed the aesthetics of Kandinsky, [as well as] Mondrian, Kupka, and Picabia [among many, many others].¹³

¹² For this argument, see Ginzburg, “From Aby Warburg to E. H. Gombrich: A Problem of Method,” as reprinted in his fascinating examination of *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, 17–59; for the art-historical context of “Iconology” within the innovative world of avant-garde thought, especially “collage,” on the eve of World War I, see W. S. Heckscher, “Die Genesis der Ikonologie,” in Kaemmerling (ed.), *Ikonographie und Ikonologie*, 112–64.

¹³ Kosinski, *Orpheus*, 250; for Apollinaire’s essay, see Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art*, 228: “Orphic Cubism”; for this movement in general, see Spate, *Orphism*.

Dionysiac "Ecstasy" Revived by the Symbolists

As we have seen, ever since Ficino advanced the idea of "intoxicated" Bacchic creative inspiration towards the end of the fifteenth century, increasingly the phenomenon of nearly witless "ecstasy" has become routinely associated with the creation of significant (or "great") vanguard art. Certainly, this was a significant point for Nietzsche and his many readers. Likewise, it represents an essential principle for much modernist art theory routinely generated by any movement choosing to call itself "avant-garde." As we also recognize, once the idea had been so provocatively advanced, thereafter it was to become evermore conventionally invoked. Accordingly, it was not even necessary specifically to label it "Bacchic" for any informed person to recognize its very specific mythological *locus classicus*. In short, with or without a prefatory euhemeristic adjective, creative "ecstasy" and its cognate phenomena always were, and still are, best understood historically as being "Bacchic/Dionysiac" in character; this designation applies as much in their understood sources and functions and—additionally and literally—even in their very "inspiration."¹⁴ The term *inspiration* was, for example, popular with sentient Victorians, either painters and poets, and they, like the rest, employed it to designate the happy condition of a sensitive soul made susceptible to privileged communications with the divine.¹⁵

The most influential writer among the British aesthetes was, of course, Walter Pater (1839–1894). For Pater, and more importantly for his innumerable readers and devoted followers, *art* itself became a substitute for *religion* because, as Pater so influentially described it, the artist's vision was now conceived as semi-religious in inspiration. In short, by applying the old Bacchic ritual term "ecstasy" to a new, purely aesthetic, state, he, in effect, makes a religion of art. In an essay published in 1868, Pater spoke ecstatically of "the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for art's sake." Such are the "high passions [that] give one this quickened sense of life, *ecstasy*

¹⁴ For the standard "Dionysian" undercurrents in European literature, see Stock, *Flutes of Dionysus*; besides "ecstasy" and "rapture," the perennially recognizable "Dionysian elements in literature include daemonic possession, exorcism, prophesy; magic," etc. (*Flutes of Dionysus*, 71).

¹⁵ For some other Symbolist-era illustrations (besides Kosinski's) of Dionysiac imagery, usually however with latent misogynist purposes, Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity* (index: "Dionysus," "Dionysiac characteristics").

and sorrow of love [which is like] *religious enthusiasm*.” Pater also went on to describe religion, and so art as well, as “a beautiful disease or disorder of the senses,” and so “the three stages of a fatal descent” in religious enthusiasm are recognized to be “reverie, illusion, delirium.”¹⁶

Even though we may doubt that Pater had ever read Ficino, nonetheless the Florentine had said much the same thing, but much earlier. This simile—art = religion = art—became much better known as it was expressed in Pater’s widely read, and often translated, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). In the “Conclusion,” he refers to a highly desirable, but rare, condition of “passion or insight or intellectual excitement,” and that impassioned state allows a privileged, or better “initiated,” soul (according to his now famous phrasing) “to burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy.” Stirred by “art and song,” occasionally “great passions may give this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, the various forms of enthusiastic activity,” particularly when these arise numinously from “the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for art’s sake.”¹⁷ Perhaps not surprisingly, in 1876, Pater was later to publish *A Study of Dionysus*, and as specifically focused upon the intense aesthetic revelations derived from Bacchic “ecstasy.”¹⁸

It is, however, with the French Symbolists that the specifically Bacchic linkages to the completely new kind of specifically *aesthetic* “ecstasy”—and as a kind framed nearly exactly in the way that Dionysiac *ecstasy* had been initially formulated by Plato in his *Phaedrus* dialogue—become clearly identified, and it was frequently evoked as such. According to G.-Albert Aurier (1865–1892), the sensitive Symbolist artist employs evocative “signs” drawn from nature, and these he must translate into radically simplified, or “abstract,” lines, forms, and colors. The pictographic signs in themselves can, however, only become aesthetically meaningful, or artistically significant (and signifying), once the artist achieves a beatific state of spiritual exaltation, an enraptured condition which Aurier literally calls “*l’extase*”—and which term he ascribes to Plato. (**fig. 18**) Inspired by his recent viewing of Gauguin’s Symbolist painting of *The Vision after the Sermon, or the Struggle of Jacob and the Angel* (1888), early in 1891 Aurier published an enthusiastic appraisal of the artist in which he observed

¹⁶ Pater, as quoted in Dorra, *Symbolist Art Theories*, 28–29; emphasis mine.

¹⁷ Pater, *The Renaissance*, 158–59.

¹⁸ Stock, *Flutes of Dionysius*, 297.

that “only the superior man is enlightened by means of the virtue the Alexandrian [Neoplatonists] so aptly named *l’extase*, ecstasy,” here meaning a sudden spiritual-intellectual revelation. At such a liminal moment, *l’homme supérieur* becomes convinced that “he is but a sign . . . whereas the stupid human, fooled by the appearances that will make him repudiate essential ideas, remains blind as he travels through forests of symbols.”

Following Plato’s ancient lead, Aurier accepts that “the only real entities in this world are ideas [and physical] objects only reveal the external appearances of these ideas.” At his literally dazzling moment of intellectual or aesthetic recognition, Aurier feels “ecstasy,” that is, the experience of an:

emotion so great and so precious that it causes the soul to quiver in the presence of the undulating drama of abstractions. Oh, how few are they whose bodies and hearts are moved by the sublime vision and pure ideas! But this gift [*donnée*] also happens to be the *sine qua non* [.] spiritual illumination, the golden key, the daimon, the Muse. Thanks to this [ecstatic] gift, symbols—that is, ideas—rise out of the darkness, become animated, started living a life that is no longer our contingent and relative life but [is instead] a life of dazzling light that is the essential life, the life of art, the life of the being.

Besides being a phenomenon familiar to the ancient Neoplatonists, this awesome ecstatic effect was also commonly experienced by much more modern sensitives, the occultists. Among the recognized esoteric patriarchs, the example most often cited by the Symbolist writers was Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), likewise credited by Aurier with having been “initiated.” According to Aurier’s exclamation,

Oh, how rare, in truth, among those who flatter themselves that they have ‘artistic dispositions,’ how rare are the truly blessed, the eyelids of their soul having become unsealed, who can exclaim as did Swedenborg, the inspired seer: “This very night, the eyes of my inner man were opened. They became capable of peering into the heavens, into the world of ideas and into hell!” And yet, is that not the preliminary and necessary initiation that the true artist, the absolute artist, must undergo?

As his prestigious example of the truly “initiated,” and thus “inspired,” modern artist, naturally Aurier cites Paul Gauguin (as in **fig. 18**), who

seems to me one of those sublime [visionary and ecstatic] travelers [possessing] the clairvoyance of that “inner eye of man,” to which Swedenborg refers. . . . As a result, do not those who neither see the

[Symbolist] idea nor believe in it deserve our compassion, just as do the unfortunate, stupid prisoners of Plato's allegorical cave?¹⁹

Éliphas Lévi, a Model for Inspired Symbolist "Initiation"

Immediately before the advent of the Symbolist era, all those primordial themes, particularly the ones focusing upon "the generic genius of divine genius" and "the archetype poet-god," certainly did repeatedly, perhaps even initially, achieve new prominence in widely-read *occultist* literature. This is a point best proven by reference to the easily accessible texts of Éliphas Lévi, an author cited by Kosinski as having served as a recognized influence upon most of the Symbolist poets and artists. Lévi was the *nom de plume ésotérique* of Alphonse-Louis Constant (1810–1875), a figure now generally acknowledged by many scholars to be the most important synthesizer of esoterica in nineteenth-century France.²⁰ Lévi is, moreover, a wonderfully emblematic sign of his age, just as Joseph Beuys (fig. 24) is for ours. My guess (for no one seems ever to have made a census) is that nearly all the Symbolist poets had read, perhaps even owned, Lévi's decidedly poetic expositions of the esoteric wonders. Unquestionably, Lévi's popular publications repeatedly discuss, even verbally "illustrate," all the standard, nineteenth-century, occultist issues—and also many more belonging to the standard rhetoric of modernist art theory to be published much later.

For instance, in his widely read *L'Histoire de la Magie* (1860), Lévi stated that "man is born in the bondage of his passions, but he can reach emancipation through intelligence." Having announced his grand theme of imaginative or "spiritual liberation," a topic endlessly discussed in subsequent avant-garde literature under the rubric of "creative freedom," Lévi then addresses this concern to the one of those exalted types whom Nietzsche later called the *Uebermensch* ("Superman"), he who magnanimously liberates his fellows from ignorance. This is a person of superior, creative, intellectual and ethical, endowments. As such, he represents an obvious role-model for the motif of the divinely inspired, Creator-Artist as Prophet later championed by the likes of Kandinsky and Apollinaire. As Lévi repeatedly

¹⁹ Aurier, as in Dorra, *Symbolist Theories*, 197–99, 202.

²⁰ For this important historical figure, see McIntosh, *Éliphas Lévi*.

affirmed, “those who are in liberation should govern those who are [still] in bondage.” Nevertheless, this messianic mission of emancipation by means of “the revelation of Occult Secrets” is to be a literally secret operation: “Woe to those who lay bare the secret of divine generation to the impure gaze of the crowd. Keep the sanctuary shut!”²¹ The historical reason for this commonplace injunction, expressive of both power and privilege, is self-apparent to Lévi, and to his many followers: “Initiation became an exclusive privilege of high castes.”²² As we already know, this notion is a cultural commonplace: long before, it represented standard rhetoric among the Florentine Neoplatonists.

Occultism, under its many guises and names, is nearly always the expression of the esoteric Union of Imagination and Will, with the former serving the ends of the latter (and all such esoteric terms are typically capitalized). The Imagination conceives of *signs* and *symbols*; by the means of these, the Will works its way and acts upon the phenomenal world. In short, it is all “Magic,” *la magie*, pure and simple. This idea was explicitly so stated by Éliphas Lévi, and some years before the official advent of the so-called “Symbolist” period around 1880, itself notoriously advocating a host of esoteric Signs and Symbols. As Lévi characteristically affirms,

The Will is omnipotent when it is armed with the living forces of Nature. Thought is idle and dead until it manifests by word or sign; it can, therefore, neither spur nor direct Will. The Sign, being the indispensable form of thought, is the necessary instrument of Will. The more perfect the Sign, the more powerfully is the thought formulated, and the Will is consequently directed with more force. . . . Intelligence and Faith, the Intelligence of Nature and Faith in its eternally Active Cause—of such is the life of Signs.²³

Imagine that: “Signs,” and all this being bruited about long before trendy French academics came up with “semiotics” and other fashionably “deconstructive” *post*-modernist stratagems.

Besides making manifest what might be called the typical sociological patterns common to the esoteric coterie, particularly their exclusionary biases, Lévi also conveniently catalogues its perennial, basic themes. One of these is the dynamic notion of an animistic or vitalist universe, which is also the kind later delineated in some detail

²¹ Lévi, *The History of Magic*, 60.

²² Lévi, *ibid.*, 61.

²³ Lévi, *ibid.*, 366.

in manifestos published by the Futurists after 1908.²⁴ The invisibly “living world” is dynamic, also expressive of a “Spiritualist” life beyond death, in which, Lévi states, “being is substance and life; life manifests itself by movement; movement is perpetuated by equilibrium; equilibrium is, therefore, the law of immortality.”²⁵ This “law” is, in fact, pseudo-scientific, merely basing itself upon the supposed operations of the world around us: “The secret of the Occult Sciences,” Lévi affirms, “is that of Nature herself.”

Lévi’s highly influential esotericism is, typically, a dialectical system, always seeking to prove the existence of “that Absolute, which is sought by the foolish and found only by the wise, [which] is the truth, the reality and the reason of Universal Equilibrium.” As always, “such Equilibrium is the Harmony which proceeds from the Analogy of the Opposites.”²⁶ According to this omnipresent “Analogy of the Opposites,” therefore, the timeless pursuit of the Occult Sciences is: “the Absolute Science of Equilibrium. It is essentially religious; it presided at the formation of dogmas in the antique world and has [since] been thus the nursing mother of all civilizations.”²⁷ In the larger sense,

This means that the universal movement is produced by the Analogies of Fixed and Volatile—the Volatile tending to be fixed, and the Fixed to become volatile—thus producing a continual exchange between the modes of the One Substance, and from the fact of the exchange of the combinations of Universal Form in ever-lasting renewal.

Whereas the preceding picture was strictly laid out according to truly ancient *alchemical* terminology, Lévi’s conclusion seems more modern, for mentioning “Science”:

Let it be certified: (1) that the life resulting from motion can only be maintained by the succession and the perfecting of forms; (2) that the Science of perpetual motion is the Science of life; (3) that the purpose of this [occult] Science is the correct apprehension of equilibrated influences; (4) that all renewal operates by destruction, each generation therefore involving a death and each death a generation. . . . It becomes fixed by the phenomena of polarization.²⁸

²⁴ For these Futurist texts, see Chipp, *Theories*, 284–308.

²⁵ Lévi, *The History of Magic*, 221.

²⁶ Lévi, *ibid.*, 358.

²⁷ Lévi, *ibid.*, 361.

²⁸ Lévi, *ibid.*, 363–64. One often finds this traditional hermetic motif of the “reconciliation of the opposites” reappearing in modern art theory; for one example (among many), see Paul Klee, as in Chipp, *Theories*, 185–86.

Such ponderous pomposity, such sweeping generalizations, are too typical of all writings by Occultists (but Lévi is by far one of the most readable of these cranks). So much for the general commonplaces characterizing the esoteric literary style, also to become typical of so very many prose manifestos establishing the scriptures in orthodox-modern art theory. Let us now quickly review some specifically “artistic” references drawn by Eliphas Lévi.

Particularly in the light of what follows, it is especially interesting to note how Lévi (and not at all uniquely among Occultists) repeatedly calls Occultism an “Art.” As he typically states, “it must not be forgotten that Transcendental Magic is called the Sacerdotal Art and the Royal Art.”²⁹ Lévi takes as a maxim of his solitary pursuits a resounding slogan: “THE SEAL OF NATURE AND OF ART IS SIMPLICITY.”³⁰ Elsewhere, Lévi explained what may be called the historical necessity for the Occultists’ (and also the Symbolists’) commonplace obsession with “imagist” Signs and Symbols. Lévi grandly announces that, like Plato’s seer-poets,

The prophets spoke in parables and images, because abstract language was wanting to them, and because prophetic perception, being the sentiment of Harmony, or of Universal Analogies, translates naturally into images. Taken literally by the vulgar, these images become idols or impenetrable mysteries. The sum and succession of such images and mysteries constitute what is called Symbolism.

One’s logical conclusion, likewise messianic, then becomes a recognition by Lévi that “the multiplicity of Symbols has been a book of poesy indispensable to the education of human genius.”³¹

Finally, besides specifically, constantly, alluding to the contemporary Occultist of 1860 as both an “Artist” and a “Symbolist,” Lévi also neatly establishes the validity of currently commonplace assertions held by historians and anthropologists that large-scale occultist irruptions are mainly manifestations of anxiety induced by technological change and social disruption. According to the way that Lévi conveniently explained the situation of his contemporaries in 1860, “in the chaos of universal doubt, and amidst the conflict of science and faith, the great men and the seers figure as sickly artists, seek-

²⁹ Lévi, *History of Magic*, 110.

³⁰ Lévi, *ibid.*, 226.

³¹ Lévi, *Transcendental Magic*, 195.

ing the ideal beauty at the risk of their reason and their life.” Unfortunately, in his age—and just as in our’s, today—neither avant-garde nor bohemian “Artists,” neither marginal nor clairvoyant “Occultists,” neither the “ecstatic Poet” nor the “enthusiastic Genius,” are ever properly appreciated by society at large. According to Lévi’s righteous lament,

Genius is judged by the tribunal of mediocrity, and this judgment is without appeal, because, being the light of the world, Genius is accounted as a thing that is null and dead whenever it ceases to enlighten. The ecstasy of the Poet is controlled by the indifference of the prosaic multitude, and every enthusiast who is rejected by general good sense is a fool and not a genius. Do not count the great Artists as bondsmen of the ignorant crowd, for it is the crowd which imparts to their talent the balance of reason.³²

Lévi is an emblematic historical figure, one whose crucial role in precociously defining fin-de-siècle artistic culture has not really been properly acknowledged by scholars documenting the historical formation of distinctly modernist thought, particularly the implicit *occultist* content of its “vanguard” *art*. The historical situation of the Esoteric Tradition, visibly infecting all levels of Occidental modernism, and for which initially Lévi was its most popular prophet, is a complementary factor to a larger, on-going problem of specific interest to this study. The late James Webb (1946–1980) was the most accomplished historian of the Esoteric Tradition and the author of a monumental study collectively called “The Age of the Irrational.” Besides on-going influences exerted by the ubiquitous issue of “inspiration,” with its own recognizably Dionysiac roots, there is the fact (usually ignored) that, as Webb correctly and repeatedly emphasized, “Occultism has always been of particular interest to the modern artist.”³³ I can personally vouch for Webb’s conclusion: as the cliché would have it, some of my best friends are (as I was once also) *artists*, and many of them are indeed devoted fans of clearly “esoteric” literature and thought (but as I never have been).

³² Lévi, *History of Magic*, 358.

³³ Since Webb’s premature death, scholarly support for this conclusion has been forthcoming (but much more work is called for); for an exhaustive and many faceted approach to the problem of the complex relationships finally recognized as having existed between fin-de-siècle occultism and early modern art, see now the various art-historical essays assembled in Tuchman (ed.), *Spiritual in Art*.

Basically, this situation has to do with the frequently commented upon stance of the modern artist, a sensitive soul with a magnanimous world-mission to uplift the ignorant masses. Arising from his fashionably sensitive stance of bohemian and/or avant-garde “alienation,” mostly acquired initially in France during the post-Napoleonic era, the eventual result was for the Artist to take on, stated Webb, the more positive “stance of the elect race.” As Webb further recognized, this haughty pose is a functional parallel to the perennial “need among Occultists to appear especially alert,” or more “prophetic” than is the “ignorant crowd.” This is a persistent, essentially snobbish, trait that we have already seen illustrated, in 1860, by Éliphas Lévi’s writings—and many, many later writers could also be quoted to similar ends. Nonetheless, we have documented the precedent for all this talk about “inspired” poets and artists affecting the “stance of the elect race” such as it had been laid down in Florence by Pico and Ficino writing much (much) earlier.

Although he did not cite the important contribution made by Renaissance art theory to our present-day condition of vanguard exclusionary tribalism, Webb concludes that,

Another group which proclaimed itself “elect” was that of the Artists. . . . Because of the juxtaposition of Occultist and Artist in Bohemia, occult teaching became the source to which the priests of this, one of the several secular religions, most easily turned. The two traditional patterns of redemption—the pursuit of the Beautiful, the Good, representing the search for Divine Union, whilst the descent into the Abyss is the alchemical process, the progress through the [Dionysiac] Mysteries, trial by ordeal—these became translated into terms of Art; but also of the Artist’s life.

Without these traditional [as much esoteric as Dionysiac] bases, the mythical figure of the Artist would not be as it is popularly conceived today. . . . There has always been something of the magical in the work of the artist. The ability to conceive and execute personal worlds, conceptual, visual, abstracted, is, by definition, out of the ordinary. . . . In any case, because *Art itself had become a religion*, the Artist naturally acquired the status of priest. . . . The Artist was at liberty—indeed compelled—to treat of the standards of the world as if they did not exist.³⁴

³⁴ Webb, *The Occult Underground*, 281–83 (emphasis mine). For more historical analyses of this now-commonplace staple of avant-garde conviction, that is, “*Art as Religion*,” see Kosinski, *Orpheus*, 63 ff., “Mysticism and the Symbolist Aesthetic: Art as Religion.” Kosinski does not, however, cite (as I do here) some earlier (and unquestionably influential) statements by Éliphas Lévi to the exactly the same emphatic effect. In

And that contextual observation, in a larger sense, explains the *raison d'être* of a acerbic remark made some four-score years ago by José Ortega y Gasset: "The characteristic of the new art, from a social viewpoint, consists of dividing the public into two classes of men—those who understand it, and those who do not."³⁵ As was the case, say, five hundred years earlier, the population is still divided between the clergy and the laity.

Elsewhere in his magnificent two-volume historical study of the modern Esoteric Tradition, James Webb draws a wider, and again quite correct, conclusion regarding the relation between what he so aptly calls the "Occult Establishment" and the contemporary Art Establishment. "Illuminated Art derives from Occultism," Webb tersely asserts, "and much modern art is indirectly illuminated, or directly 'occult'." Webb then points out how specifically, "this alliance began in Paris of the 1890s, when the Occult Revival coincided exactly with the Symbolist movement, and the Symbolists drew a great part of their inspiration from the Occultists. *Occult theories resulted in the conception of the Artist as a saint and a magician*, while his art became less and less representative of ordinary reality and hinted at things 'beyond.'"

At this point, Webb again underscores the crucial role of the Symbolists, those mostly "initiated" creators of fin-de-siècle art and theory, in the formation of those collective attitudes—especially the megalomaniacal posture of the Priest-Prophet-Magician-Artist—which most tellingly characterize so much of forthcoming élitist, orthodox-modernist, cultural phenomena. According to Webb,

from this departure of the Symbolists, from their universe of agreed discourse for private or superior worlds, there has sprung the [still current] tampering with "everyday" reality which has become so central a feature of modern art. Naturally, similar developments were going on elsewhere, just as the reaction against the tyranny of Reason occurred in other places. But Paris remained the hub from which the magic influences radiated, the center of artistic and occult experiment.³⁶

any event, the complementary equation, that is, "Artist as Magician," is truly ancient; see Kris and Kurz, *Die Legende vom Künstler*, 69 ff., "Der Künstler als Magier." Moreover, after spending decades working inside academic, "studio-art," departments, I could name any number of (would-be) avant-garde artist-instructors who voraciously devoured esoteric literature (even a couple of former department heads!).

³⁵ Ortega y Gasset, as in Poggioli, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 91.

³⁶ Webb, *Occult Establishment*, 421; emphasis mine.

This then, the typically overlooked, proto-modernist, “Esoteric Tradition,” proves to be a major context for the Symbolist macrocosm mainly crafted in Paris. This was a cultural movement which proved to be as much diversely emotional in its actual effects as it was stridently ideological in its published doctrines. As is, however, recognized by art historians, unquestionably Symbolist theoretical prescriptions—particularly those calling for a properly “subjective” and precociously “abstract” art,—proved decisive for the thought and art of many modern artists subsequently following their lead, and for decades afterwards. In fact, the effects—visual as well as mental—initially sought by the Symbolists are now canonic, *orthodox*. It was the Symbolists who first consistently pursued the neo-Dionysiac ecstatic revelations presented in, or by, “pure form”; likewise, they implicitly set a precedent for pursuing creative “Automatism.” So doing, thus they produced a convincing theoretical precedent for—and even some scientific evidence, dubbed “*la nouvelle psychologie*”³⁷—precociously validating a by-now wholly conventional, *orthodox*-modernist, pursuit of the artistic “Image Made by Chance.” As everyone knows, it was mainly the Surrealists who made a modernist artistic dogma out of the automatist or “*subconscient*” experience—and they, too, revered Dionysus, and naturally so.

³⁷ For this “new psychology,” see Silverman, *Art Nouveau*, 75–106.

CHAPTER NINE

DIONYSIAC ECSTASY AND MODERNIST ART-WORSHIP

"Ecstasy" and the Power of Modernist Music

Superficial structural analogies aside, we need observe the fact of a radical mental difference between the function and spirit of the Renaissance art practise, itself mainly an expression of the élite social classes, and some effects later wrought by its strictly modern offshoots, including some expressions of lower-class emotionality. This dramatic break with tradition needs to be examined in detail. We may do by briefly reiterating an odd connection existing between *mysticism*, which we have seen to be repeatedly tied to the "ecstatic" phenomenon, and the power of modernist (versus "classical") *music*. One reason to do so is because most testators of "ecstatic" encounters have themselves inevitably experienced modern music, particularly the mass-produced, popular kind. Albeit reluctantly, we have all been exposed to American "pop culture"; calling itself "Rock n' Roll," its main musical staple is propelled eponymously by *rhythm*. Although the phenomenon proves impervious to quantification, modern *rhythms*, like none other known previously in world history, have obviously shaped the modernist consciousness to make it somehow unlike its historical precedents. In fact, as the historical records do tell us, the closest analogue is the *εκτασις* experienced *en masse* long ago by the eager Hellenic worshippers of Dionysios.

In the most obvious sense, this historical caesura has to do with the basic idea of "modernism" itself. *Modernism* is a commonplace notion which has been summed up by at least one writer as conventionally representing "the idea of a radical rupture with European artistic tradition."¹ Another fundamental concept central to modernism is that of the "avant-garde," which is, according to Renato Poggioli, the major historian of principles of vanguard thought, the expression of "activism." Besides its obvious political applications,

¹ Leavens, *From "291" to Zürich*, 52.

activism is also, and obviously so, a prerequisite for an ubiquitous kind of activity-based musical performance, in short, a contemporary “rock concert,” in which the audience participates, “acts,” by dancing and singing along with the band. Poggioli has, for instance, observed how “activism” also describes “a precise formal tendency within German Expressionism . . . elevating psychological revolt to the level of practical and social reform,” and he also notes the provocative titles of two quintessentially “Expressionist” publications, *Der Sturm* and *Die Aktion*. Nevertheless, this tendency nearly inevitably leads to a seemingly opposed result: “the idea of a blind, gratuitous activity, the cult of the act.”²

Other key, distinctly modernist, ideas separating the intentions and formulation of the late-to-post modernist artworks from their supposed Renaissance predecessors are the complementary notions of “synesthesia” and “simultaneism.” For our purposes, *synesthesia* refers to the overlap among sense perceptions, and *simultaneism* signifies a manifestation of the totality of experience.³ One can trace these synthetic, specifically modernist, effects in turn to their own immediate artistic-historical prototype: the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of Richard Wagner. The Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* is what the German musicologist H. H. Stuckenschmidt calls “a ‘total’ work of art involving both eye and ear.”⁴ Stuckenschmidt also calls our attention to a much larger Wagnerian psychological effect: “a cult of suffering, finding sanctuary in the idea of redemption. . . . Not merely agony, but the ability to give expression to it in its most intensified form, became the paramount aim in the aesthetic hierarchy of the age. . . . Wagner signified the beginning of a new era in which there would be an end to harmonic and tonal tradition.”⁵ Although not customarily recognized as such, as opposed to artworks patronized by upper-class opera-goers, a rock-concert is a Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* designed for consumption by the proletariat.

Thus, Wagner’s highly popular performance pieces—incorporating music, painting, poetry, drama, dance, and lush, overripe emotionality—

² Poggioli, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 27–29.

³ For these two fundamental concepts in modern art thinking, appearing in many different contexts, see Tuchman, *Spiritual in Art*; these are also discussed in a specifically Dadaist context by Leavens, *From “291” to Zurich*.

⁴ Stuckenschmidt, *Twentieth-Century Music*, 17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7, 24.

had first introduced the typically modernist, subjectivist concept of the “total theatre” to *mass* audiences in both Europe and the Americas. Well over a century later, the quintessential “rock concert” also automatically presupposes a *mass* audience. The excitement inevitably attendant upon Wagnerian performances was brilliantly conveyed by Charles Baudelaire in an article published in 1861.⁶ According to his well informed, eyewitness account, “Wagner’s concerts promised to be a veritable battle of doctrines, like one of those solemn crises in art, one of those confused scimmages into which critics, artists and public have the habit of flinging all their passions.” As a striking example, Baudelaire decided to

quote the following passage from an article by M. [Héctor] Berlioz (9 February 1860): “The foyer of the Théâtre-Italien was a curious sight to see on the night of the first concert. It was nothing but angry shouts and arguments which always seemed on the point of ending in blows. . . . In our country at least, when it is a matter of appreciating a type of music different from the normal run, passion and prejudice alone are vocal, preventing good sense and good taste from getting a word in.”⁷

Having drawn for us (with the help of Berlioz) a vivid picture of the typical avant-garde context of raucous doctrinal strife surrounding Wagner’s overwhelming performance piece, Baudelaire then sets about to convey its actual effect. The perceptual-conceptual significance of what he had just witnessed turns out to be a uniquely mystical-sensual-emotional syndrome; it was, in short, *synesthesiac*. From this, it becomes clear that, at least for this hypersensitive witness, “total” theater leads to a truly “total” experience, that is, *simultaneity*. As we can also perceive on our own, this is yet another recycling of the ancient experience of *εκστασις*. As told by Baudelaire, the as yet un-named experience of *simultanéité* inevitably leads to a revelation of the “reciprocal analogies,” here meaning nothing less than an awareness of the “oneness” of all of God’s creations! According to Baudelaire’s excited recitation,

By means of the innumerable combinations of sound, the tumults of the human soul, Richard Wagner was the equal of the most exalted,

⁶ Baudelaire, “Richard Wagner et Tannhäuser à Paris,” in *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, 325–57.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 326–27.

and certainly was as great as the greatest. I have often heard the opinion expressed that music could not claim to convey anything with precision, such as words or painting do. That is true to a certain extent, but it is not wholly true. Music conveys things in its own way, and by means peculiar to itself. . . . The only really surprising thing would be that sound could not suggest color, that colors could not give the idea of melody, and that both sound and color together were unsuitable as media for ideas; [this must be so] since *all things always have been expressed by reciprocal analogies*, ever since the day when *God created the world as a complex, indivisible totality*.⁸

Baudelaire thus thoughtfully acknowledged the transcendental nature of his performance-induced, cosmic revelation. With even more spectacular eloquence, he then proceeds to relate to us the exact nature—pure *ecstasy*!—of this revelation’s sensual, earth-bound equivalencies:

I felt freed from the constraint of weight, and recaptured the memory of the rare joy that dwells in high places. . . . Then, involuntarily, I evoked the delectable state of a man possessed by a profound reverie in total solitude, but a solitude with vast horizons and bathed in a diffused light; immensity without other decor than itself. Soon I became aware of a heightened brightness, of a light growing in intensity so quickly that the shades of meaning provided by a dictionary would not suffice to express this constant increase of burning whiteness. Then I achieved a full apprehension of a soul floating in light, of an *ecstasy* compounded of joy and insight, hovering above and far removed from the natural world.⁹

Baudelaire correctly, indeed almost clinically, concluded that, so enlightened, literally he “had undergone, or so at least it seemed to me, a *spiritual operation, a revelation*.” To these striking observations by Baudelaire, there may now be added another, pointing out a much larger historical context for his otherworldly experiences. In short, his account both sets the rapturous tone and has the transcendental content found in all the greatest mystic writers belonging to the esoteric tradition—including, of course, Swedenborg. Likewise, and long before, such recollections of *rapture* and *transport* were commonplace in descriptions of the cathartic Dionysiac encounter. As one now wonders, are these not the same marvelous and soul-transforming results sought by all *modern* performance artists, especially the ones that perform at mass-audience rock concerts?

⁸ Ibid., 327–31 (emphasis mine).

⁹ Ibid., 331–32.

But what precisely was in Richard Wagner's mind a century-and-a-half ago? To answer these questions, again our best source seems Charles Baudelaire, a most eloquent spokesman for a new kind of psychically susceptible, mass-audience culture. Besides wonderfully conveying *his* state of mind, the Frenchman, unquestionably endowed with a most discerning mind, quoted some statements written by "the master himself." In these, Wagner got right to the heart of the significance and purposes of his multimedia, rhythmic and emotionally convulsive, performance art. As transcribed by Baudelaire, the German composer stated that

the only picture of human life that may be called "poetic" is the one where all motivations, that [used to] have meaning only for the abstract intelligence, [now] give way to purely human motives rooted in the heart. This tendency—the one relating to the invention of the poetic subject—is the sovereign law that governs the poetic form and representation. . . . From this stage, I say that I was inevitably being led to point to the *Myth* as the ideal material for the poet.

As Wagner further claimed,

The myth is the primitive and anonymous poetry of the People [*das Volk*], and we find it taken up again in every age, remodeled constantly by the great poets of cultivated ages. In the myth, indeed, human relations discard almost completely their conventional form, which is intelligible only to abstract reason. They show what is really human in life, what can be understood in any age, and they show it in that concrete form, exclusive of all imitation, that confers upon all true myths their individual character, which is recognizable at the first glance. . . . I abandoned once and for all the domain of [factual] history, and established myself [instead] in that of legend. Whatever the epoch or nation it belongs to, legend has the advantage of incorporating exclusively what is purely human in the given epoch or nation, of presenting it in an original and very striking form, thus intelligible at the first glance.

His concluding statement is especially telling:

The nature of the scene and the whole tone of the legend combine to *transport the mind* to a dream-state—quickly *carrying it on to perfect clairvoyance*—and the mind then discovers a different concatenation of phenomena, which the eyes could not perceive in the normal state of waking.¹⁰

¹⁰ Wagner, as quoted in *ibid.*, 338–40.

Wagner's analyses of the literally "clairvoyant" *raison d'être* of his own multimedia performance art functionally share numerous ideas with those expressed much earlier by individuals said to be experiencing close encounters with the transformative Dionysian experience; they too were *rapti sunt*, "transported." These common reference points would include the following issues. As Wagner said at the outset, there exists in such modern art an understood opposition between "abstract intelligence" and the irrational profundities of the poetic instinct, "rooted in the heart." In the Wagnerian translation, *Myth* (or "legend") is the proper vehicle for poetic expression. Why? Above all, just like the ancient Dionysian rites, because it is "*primitive*," rooted in the "anonymous poetry of the People." Such *völkisch* materials are timeless, "taken up again in every age, remodeled constantly." These eternal (*ewige*) themes are the antithesis of "conventional form, intelligible only to abstract reason." Nevertheless, they are "recognizable at the first glance."

Another statement by Wagner provides apparently convincing evidence for the composer's involvement with contemporary occultist beliefs, specifically the Theosophical kind. As Wagner affirmed,

I am convinced that there are universal currents of Divine Thought, vibrating in the ether everywhere, and that anyone who can feel those vibrations is *inspired*, provided he is conscious of the process. . . . I believe, first of all, that it is this universal vibrating energy that binds the soul of man to the Almighty central power, from which emanates the Life-Principle to which we all owe our existence. This energy links us to the Supreme Force of the Universe, of which we are all a part. . . . In that trance-like condition, which is the prerequisite of all true creative effort, I feel that I am one with this vibrating Force, and that it is omniscient, and that I can draw upon it to an extent that is limited only by my own capacity to do so. . . . Imagination is the creative force, and this is true, I find, not only of musical creations but also of external circumstances. . . . Believe me, imagination creates "reality" [*die Fantasie schafft die Wirklichkeit*]. This is a great cosmic law.¹¹

So much for the content of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a distinctly totalized and self-referential "artwork" (so designated: *Kunstwerk*) where only "*die Fantasie schafft die Wirklichkeit*." And, just as we were

¹¹ Wagner, as quoted in Godwin, *Music, Mysticism and Magic*, 238; as Godwin concludes from this statement, Wagner's "beliefs had come to resemble those being publicized at the same time [1880] by the Theosophical Society," founded by Madame Blavatsky five years earlier.

told, “anyone who can feel those vibrations is *inspired*.” If this is its avowed purpose, then what seems to be the central formal principle of such vibrating “inspiration”? In a word, this is *rhythm*. This is the means by which the performance artist is led “to the extreme limit of his art.” As for the audience culture, what does rhythm *do* to it and, specifically, what are the desirable psychological effects of rhythm as such? As Wagner repeatedly states, rhythm is powerful; it captivates its audience; it governs their emotional states; it works a spell; *it transports the mind*. Most of us have experienced those hypnotic and/or intellect-numbing effects, but mainly at the Joe Sixpack audience-cultural level: at a rock concert! And recognizing that participation, however reluctantly as ivory-tower elitists, we come full circle, all the way back to the ecstatic Mysteries of primitive Greek Dionysian religion.

We also come back to the modernist subject of imposed psychological cohesion *en masse*. The Branch Davidians were led by one David Koresh (a.k.a. Vernon Howell); at his instigation, eighty-six of them underwent a collective immolation by fire, a mass suicide, in April 1993. Koresh spiritually inflamed his eventually cremated cult with fiery sermons, some lasting up to twelve hours. He would then conclude his ritualistic harangues with a jumped-up rock concert (and some of his rock n’ roll performances survive on tape). Mass performances of loud and frenzied gospel-music is also a propelling force for those who subscribe to Pentacostal religion. They believe that the Holy Spirit descends upon each and every one of them; its arrival makes them speak in tongues, have visions. So doing, they hew to the very letter of Scripture: “. . . filled with the Holy Ghost [they] speak with other tongues” (Act 2:4). So possessed, they hop, twist and dance in the aisles; then song gives way to a string of “oooohs” and “waaahs” and “la-la-lahs.” This is a typically American, “democratic” approach to religion: instant sanctification for all comers. The role of music in inflaming this particularly proletarian branch of evangelical revelation is easily confirmed: just go to the nearest Pentacostal Temple in your neighborhood. According to the historical records, albeit with different lyrics, the very same thing happened at the ancient Dionysian *mysteria*.

Everybody knows, even including otherwise wholly autistic teenagers, that the bottom-line experience at a rock concert is *rhythm*. As just a word, that, too, is nothing new; it comes from the ancient Greek, *rhythmos*. You will probably be surprised to learn that it was none

other than Aristotle who first made the physical basis of “rock ‘n roll”—*rhythmos*—into a basic component of “fine art.” As we all should have already known, Aristotle had defined (in *Poetics* 6. 2–3) the proper social function of the most sublime of all kinds of classical dramatic expression—“Tragedy”—as being the release of *katharsis*: “effecting the proper purgation [*katharsis*] of the emotions of pity and fear.” The actual formal characteristic distinguishing classical *tragodia* was, he said, “language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament,” and that embellishment represents the specific means for achieving that needful emotion laxative, *katharsis*.¹² Aristotle specifically adds that we are not talking about words, rather: “rhythm, harmony and song”—*rhythmòn kai harmonían kai mélos*¹³—meaning the very stuff of proletarian rock ‘n roll as concocted thousands of years later! Without making specific reference to Aristotle and his theory of an emotionally therapeutic *katharsis*, pop mythologist Joseph Campbell made the very same functional connection—and he explicitly made the essential connection to Dionysus! As he recalled,

Rock music has never seemed that interesting to me. But when you see a room with 8,000 young people going through it for five hours to the beat of these boys [e.g. the rock-band, “The Grateful Dead”], and when you see those 8,000 kids all going up in the air together: Listen, this is powerful stuff! And what is it? *The first thing I thought of was the Dionysian festivals, of course.* This energy and these terrific instruments, with electric things that zoom in: This is more than music! It turns something on in here, in the heart. And what it turns on is life-energy. *This is Dionysus talking through these kids. . . .* And when the great beam of light would go over the crowd, you’d see these marvelous young faces all in utter rapture—for five hours! This is a wonderful, fervent loss of self in the larger self of a homogeneous community. This is what it’s all really about. . . . It doesn’t matter what the name of the god is, or whether it’s a rock group or a clergy. It’s somehow hitting that chord of realization of the unity of God in us all. That’s a terrific thing, and it just blows the rest away!¹⁴

In sum, all those new, mostly rhythm-driven, artistic effects so carefully engineered by Richard Wagner a century-and-a-half ago were, just as he said, calculated to alter consciousness, leading it “to a

¹² For an extensive analysis of this term, see the commentary by the modern editor, S. H. Butcher, to *Aristotle’s Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, 242 ff.

¹³ Aristotle, in *ibid.*, 22–23 (with Greek text).

¹⁴ Campbell, as in Brandelius, *Grateful Dead Family Album*, 234 (emphasis mine).

dream-state, that quickly carries it on to perfect clairvoyance. At this ecstatic stage, the mind then discovers a different concatenation of phenomena, which the eyes could not perceive in the 'normal' state." In short, that is the strictly *modernist* audience cultural experience: *mass* psychic response, a *mass* catharsis leading to *mass* passivity and compliance: a kind of collective dumbness, a *dementia* ("de-braining"), the kind now commonly achieved by a now knowing, meaning willed and skilled, use of *mass* psychic manipulation.

Again—and this should by now be perfectly obvious, as specifically explained by Richard Wagner, this is also pure *mysticism*! The ideas announced by him long ago are nothing less than the familiar arguments of the esoteric tradition, a phenomenon whose documents date back at least to the Hellenistic period. In short, other than in its "aesthetic" explanation, this is wholly conventional stuff. The psychological characteristics of such a state of purely "mystical transport" were probably best described in 1902 by William James in his classic study on *The Varieties of Religious Experience*:

Mystical states are more like states of feeling than like states of intellect Mystical states [nevertheless] seem, to those who experience them, to be also states of knowledge. They are states or insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of [apparent] significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain. When the characteristic sort of consciousness once has set in, the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power.¹⁵

In the terminology of modern occultism, the kind of psychic state so vividly described by both Wagner and Baudelaire—in this case, *art-induced psychosis*!—is properly called, at least by the True Believers, "cosmic consciousness." All this was explained by the influential Canadian occultist Richard M. Bucke in his aptly titled study celebrating a *Cosmic Consciousness* (1901). According to Mr. Bucke,

The prime characteristic of cosmic consciousness is a consciousness . . . of the life and order of the universe. Along with [this] there occurs an intellectual enlightenment which alone would place the individual on a new plane of existence—which would make him almost a member of a new species. To this is added a state of moral exaltation, an

¹⁵ James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 293.

indescribable feeling of elevation, elation, and joyousness, and a quickening of the moral sense, which is fully as striking, and more important than is the enhanced intellectual power. With these come what may be called a sense of immortality, a consciousness of eternal life.¹⁶

Whatever his putative occultist inclinations, Richard Wagner was of course quintessentially “Germanic.” This ethnographic attribute of the composer was also recognized by a German scholar, Hans Kohn. In his important study of *The Mind of Germany* (1960), Kohn pointed out how this awesome figure, so centrally placed in the modern consciousness of Germany (Joseph Beuys’s too),

bore a message of specific Germanic values, an interpretation of history and society, based upon the incomparable pre-eminence of Wagner’s art and of German folkdom. Wagner saw himself not only as a musician of genius but also as a prophet and savior. All of his creative work was infused with, and serves, this avocation . . . protesting against the nineteenth-century bourgeois world, against men without myth, passion and greatness. . . . [His was] the realm of primitive, pre-Christian myth. . . . These Nordic-Wagnerian myths [were] rediscovered and adapted in the age of nationalism for nationalistic purposes. . . . Wagner proclaimed it is necessary to found a true community of life (*Lebensgemeinschaft*), which cannot be achieved by political means, but only through art. . . . His art-work will restore the loving union of all arts, and thus set the example of a true folk-community. Alone in Europe, the Germans possess the particular talent of becoming impassioned with what they take as abstract truth, without considering its practical consequences.¹⁷

Translated into a distinctively American idiom, the same kind of *Lebensgemeinschaft* operates at a rock concert. If you have ever participated in such a highly emotionalized cultural transaction, you know this observation to be correct. Let us quickly review the contents of this catalogue of self-induced *Irrsinn* (irrationality) produced by the basic elements making up the precedent-setting Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The essential components include: primitivism, *völkisch* myth and legend, irrationality at odds with abstract reason, spiritualist revelations, strivings for an indivisible totality, anti-bourgeois social alienation, titanic rhythmic unity, audience manipulative techniques, the rule of instinct, consciousness-altering effects, paranormal

¹⁶ Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness*, 2.

¹⁷ Kohn, *Mind of Germany*, 190–204.

clairvoyance, and the will towards mass psychological manipulation and collective social transformation. In short, *εκστασις*, and “Ecstasy” is (literally) the drug of choice at postmodernist rock concerts. Since that populist phenomenon represents *modernism* in its most aberrant mode, let us momentarily retreat to blander subject matter, the broader issues pertaining to art history and their particular mode of perception and expression in a strictly modern context.

Dionysiac “Ecstasy” Exalted by the Formalist Art Critics

The next stage in the modernist art-critical appropriation of originally Bacchic “ecstasy” shifts the emphasis from the often inchoate and mystically charged focus of Symbolist aesthetics to a new arena, the strictly visual arts. This doctrinal palestra is one still very much with us: endlessly reiterated verbal analyses—and a concomitant cultural exaltation—of “pure form.” For this crucial art-historical development, representing the shift of theoretical emphasis from still mostly poetic “spiritual values” now to wholly visual “pure form,” the contribution of Roger Fry (1866–1934) is of major importance.

Like so many modernists following him, Fry exalted an artistic visual configuration perceived to be independent, preferably completely so, from the burden of narrative subject matter. Even though much indebted to the aesthetic precedent set by Pater, Fry may be reckoned the metaphorical mid-wife of a wholly formalist formula, what he decisively labelled “significant and expressive form.” As he put it, “significant form,” that which is autonomously “expressive” for being little more than “linear design and color,” is accompanied by, or actually gives birth to, deeply felt “aesthetic emotion.” The latter expression, “aesthetic emotion,” basically represents some new, brightly colored and self-consciously modernist, packaging for ancient Dionysiac *enthousiasmos*.

In an essay of 1911 on “Post Impressionism,” thus installing an art-historical label still confusing wider comprehension of contemporary Symbolist terminology and its unique purposes, Fry championed those abstracted, or autonomously functioning, “arrangements of form and color [which] are calculated to stir the imagination most deeply.” They achieve this desirable effect precisely because, states Fry, “this [pursuit] is exactly analogous to the problem of music, which is to find what arrangements of [non-mimetic] sound will have

the greatest evocative power.” The advanced painter, and his properly receptive and initiated contemporary viewers, wish to attain “the same tense passivity and alert receptiveness which the musician can count on from his auditors.” In either medium, the real goal is an “art addressing itself directly to the imagination through the senses,” and therefore the advanced painter strives for “a music of line and color.” (fig. 19) One artist who did so, and apparently for neo-Dionysiac purposes, was Henri Matisse in his ecstatic rendering of *The Dance* (1910), and as enacted by brightly tinted, modernist Maenads.¹⁸

Because these artists work “unconsciously” to a large degree, they therefore have, according to Fry, “the right to speak directly to the imagination through images created, not because of their [mimetic] likeness to external nature, but because of their fitness to appeal [directly] to the imaginative and contemplative life.” A Symbolist at heart, Fry’s underlying idea is pure “synesthesia”¹⁹—also with a clear tinge of Symbolist mysticism:

Particular rhythms of line and particular harmonies of color have spiritual correspondences, and tend to arouse now one set of feelings, now another. The artist [like the musician] plays upon us by the rhythm of line, by color, by abstract form, and by quality of the matter he employs [through] his musical phrasing, his rhythm of line, color, and plane. . . . The most vivid and direct appeal that the artist can make to the imagination is through linear design and frank oppositions of color.

The resounding conclusion is that, just as Clement Greenberg would say half a century *later* in championing the American “Abstract Expressionists”: “All the relations which make up the unity of the picture are,” Fry states, “perceived as inhering in the [flat] picture surface.” As Fry argues further, dogmatic respect for “the relations upon the flat surface have excused the want of [pictorial] illusion.”

In effect, ponderous statements of this sort mostly represent a compressed translation of Maurice Denis’s famous definition, made way back in 1890, of the ideal Symbolist painting, the kind just consisting of “*essentiellement une surface plane recouverte de couleurs en un certain ordre assemblées*,” that is, “basically a flat surface covered with colors

¹⁸ As is so argued by Kenneth Clark, *The Nude*, 395.

¹⁹ Even though the word was only coined in 1890, for the (perhaps surprising) antiquity of “synesthesia” as an artistic pursuit, see Schrader, *Sinne und Sinnesverknüpfungen*.

put together according to a certain order.” According to another essentially Symbolist conclusion reached by Fry, the real goal is not mere optical delight, rather something much more profound, like “religion.” There is no ambiguity here about the proposed *religious* mission belonging to advanced art. “Art, like religion,” Fry proclaims, “appeals to the non-mechanical parts of our nature, to what in us is rhythmic and vital.” Accordingly, “the painter’s endeavor [is made] once more conterminous with the whole range of human inspiration and desire.”²⁰ Once again (no novelty here!), *inspiratio* triumphs over the merely *mechanice*.

The fact of symbiotic relationships here newly, but firmly, established—particularly between “Art like religion,” likewise linking modernist “pure form” to ancient Dionysian “ecstasy”—was made even clearer by Fry’s immediate disciple, Clive Bell (1881–1964). This British critic published in 1914 an octavo book simply (but rather grandly) called *Art*. Bell states here that “art” and “religion” function alike—and *ecstasy* provides the concrete link between one and the other subjective operation “of human inspiration and desire.” “Religion, as I understand it,” Bell grandly announces, “is an expression of the individual’s sense of the emotional significance of the universe; I should not be surprised to find that art was an expression of the same thing. Anyway, both seem to express emotions different from and transcending the [ordinary] emotions of life. Certainly both have the power of transporting men to superhuman ecstasies: both are means to unearthly states of mind.” Specifically, this liminal and patently otherworldly moment occurs when, Bell observes, “everything can be seen as pure form, and behind pure form lurks the mysterious significance that thrills to ecstasy.”²¹

Again, it was specifically through the psychic agency of neo-Dionysiac, “unearthly states of mind,” meaning a transcendent and transporting state of “ecstasy,” that there were first made manifest to the avant-garde advocates of “pure form” all the absolutely crucial

²⁰ Fry (all of the above), as in Dorra, *Symbolist Theories*, 287–93. For a typical example of Clement Greenberg’s influential but typically doctrinaire assertions—Fry-derived, but as pronounced half a century later—that “flatness alone is unique and exclusive to pictorial art . . . flatness was the only condition painting shared with no other art,” etc., see his 1961 essay on “Modernist Painting,” as reprinted in Frascina and Harris, *Art in Modern Culture*, 308–14.

²¹ Bell, *Art*, 82, 209 (Bell’s final ecstasy of “mysterious significance” was experienced in front of a landscape by Cézanne).

modernist linkages. Namely, those are the ones repeatedly drawn between Art and Religion, “significant and expressive form,” which itself directly causes an “otherworldly,” but deeply felt, “aesthetic emotion,” and such as these were produced by newly conflated, and so designated, modernist Artists-Priests-Prophets. Even though the painterly configurations impelling all this earnest verbal endeavor do admittedly look “different,” the rhetoric itself seems scarcely more advanced than that kind routinely produced by neoplatonist art theorists in the now disparaged Mannerist era, four centuries earlier.

The Ubiquity of an Archetypal Modernist “Artist-Priest-Prophet”

We have just read how Walter Pater, by applying the Bacchic term “ecstasy” to a purely aesthetic state, in effect had invented a modernist “religion of art.” Whether or not he had read Pater, Albert Aurier had said very much the same thing—and why not, since he, too, was a compliant creature of the *Zeitgeist*. So did, among others, Roger Fry and Clive Bell, but their ardently modernist gospel was much more openly announced to be based upon the new sacrament of “pure form.” We have seen how since the Renaissance—and particularly since its timely contribution of certain Bacchic notions discussed here—the question of art-making as being either “mechanical” or “liberal” (meaning “free,” like *Liber Pater*: **figs. 1, 6, 7, 14**) need no longer be posed. “Art” has, by itself, long since acquired significant prestige, has become something very much like a self-sustaining mythic entity, even an ethical or social force.

In a book dealing with our currently entrenched “Culture of Complaint,” the ever-trenchant art critic Robert Hughes specifically deals with the issue of “Art and the Therapeutic Fallacy.” He points out (as few do) that, particularly in America, it is now traditional that “art ought to be morally and spiritually uplifting, therapeutic, a bit like religion.” He also places (but does not actually trace historically) the installation of this particularly pernicious notion in the Victorian era, when, he says, the “moralizing power of art” first engendered “reflections on exalted emotion in religious terms: benefit, conversion, refinement, unification, [ideas] raising art from being mere craft by moral utterance.” He cites a rather early statement of 1855, where the editor of an earnest American art journal, *The Crayon*, proclaims that art appreciation reveals “the moral excellence of the individual,” and therefore art “has in itself a spirit of morality.”

The next essential stage, which was reached in the 1880s—and which remains operable today—witnessed what Hughes calls a “still more secular form, that of art as therapy, personal or social.” These notions were reinforced by inscriptions traditionally associated with the avant-garde in Europe, the history of which—since the mid-nineteenth century—was typically characterized by, Hughes notes, numerous demands, all ultimately frustrated, for expressive “purity,” “revolutionary” action, and “moral” decision, all hopefully leading to a universal “spiritual renewal.”

Thus the artist implicitly becomes a spiritual leader, a minister-healer to his ostensibly sick culture. This perception is historically documented by another citation from *The Crayon*, which does directly make the artist “priestlike”: “We judge religion by the character of its priesthood, and we would do well to judge art [likewise] by the character of those who represent and embody it.”²² As we saw, in 1968 Clement Greenberg was chanting the same old dirge. The latest revival of the “Therapeutic Fallacy” (discussed further in chapter 11) is to be found in a spate of avant-garde creation presently credited to “shamanist” and “healer” artists—most notably Joseph Beuys (figs. 24, 25), shrieking “EVERY HUMAN BEING IS AN ARTIST”—and their heroic collective mission is to “reshape history.”

These ubiquitous slogans belong to the symptomology of what is perhaps the most grandiose and enduring of all modern myths about art-making. Nonetheless, without the opportune institutionalization of “Inspiration” by Cinquecento theorists, arguably none of this would have happened, at least not to the degree today characterizing the phenomenon. This is the tenacious belief, in effect a therapeutic fallacy, that art *can* effect “change,” either aesthetic or maybe even social. Granted that utopian premise, then it is frequently suggested that art can perhaps even radically transform the course of history, and that it will do so by thoroughly altering the collective public consciousness. Silly as it now seems to un-intoxicated, *post*-modernist minds, this particularly fallacious therapeutic fallacy so central to Orthodox Modernism is easy enough to document throughout the entire modernist historical course. Such documentation is needful; it serves a hygienic function, something like a cultural mammogram.

²² Hughes, *Culture of Complaint*, 25–31, 171, 174 (*Crayon* citation), 176, 179.

At the “heroic” beginning of modernist art-making, the Cubist epoch, we find (among many other writers) Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger stoutly proclaiming (in their co-authored *Du Cubisme*, 1912):

That we have agreed that the ultimate end of painting is to reach the masses; it is, however, not in the [old-fashioned] language of the masses that painting should address the masses, but in its own [distinctively modern and initiated idiom]. It will do so in order to move, to dominate, to direct [the masses], and not in order to be understood [by them]. It is the same with religions and philosophies: the artist who abstains from any concessions, who does not explain himself and who tells nothing [intelligible to the masses], builds up an internal strength whose radiance shines all around. It is in consummating ourselves within ourselves that we shall purify humanity. It is by increasing our own [psychic] riches that we shall enrich others. . . . For the partial liberties conquered by Courbet, Manet, Cézanne, and the Impressionists, Cubism substitutes an indefinite liberty. . . . There is only one truth, ours, when we impose it on everyone. And it is the faith in Beauty [i.e. “Art”] which provides the necessary strength.²³

Now *that* is a messianic mission if ever there was one: it prophesizes the biggest social and ethical revolution ever embarked upon since the historic ministry of Christ on Earth. What an obligation: “We shall purify humanity.” But, also, what arrogance: “There is only one truth, ours.” It even smacks of totalitarianism: “We impose it on everyone.” Calling to mind later Soviet and Nazi propaganda exercises of the 1930s: “It will do so in order to move, to dominate, to direct [the masses], and not in order to be understood [by them].” But, you see, it isn’t Fascism after all, instead an adamant “faith in Beauty which provides the necessary strength.” And, above all, it is acceptable because: “It [vanguard art] is the same with religions and philosophies.”

Here we have another crucial aspect of the syndrome, which had been made explicit in its strictly religious functions since the Council of Trent (1565) had explicitly defined the propagandistic purposes of Counter-Reformation art; that *propaganda fides* was also a tool, like another bludgeon, “to move, to dominate the masses.” Adolf Hitler certainly shared this opinion, as is made clear by any careful reading of *Mein Kampf* (1927).²⁴ In a much later modernist phase of

²³ Gleizes and Metzinger, as quoted in Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory*, 195.

²⁴ For Hitler’s pronouncements on art as a means to “dominate the masses,” see Moffitt, *Occultism in Avant-Garde Art*, 94–97.

German *Kultur*, in 1973, we similarly find Joseph Beuys (himself very much a child of the *Hitlerzeit*) trumpeting by-then exceedingly shopworn slogans about the utopian-messianic purposes and world-mission of art-making. According to Beuys's pontifications,

The future social order will take its shape from compatibility with the theoretical principles of art. . . . Artistic education alone provides a sound base for an efficient society. . . . Art is now the only evolutionary-revolutionary power. Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system that continues to totter along the death-line. [Our role is] to dismantle in order to build a social organism as a work of art. . . . Only a conception of art revolutionized to this degree can turn a into a politically productive force, coursing through each person, and so shaping history. . . . This is the concept of art that carries within itself not only the revolutionizing of the historic-bourgeois concept of knowledge (materialism and positivism), but also of religious activity. EVERY HUMAN BEING IS AN ARTIST . . .²⁵

Now that is clear: just mention an inherent "religious activity," and then it becomes obligatory that "EVERY HUMAN BEING IS AN ARTIST." Although not admitted by Beuys's numerous postmodernist acolytes, his thoughts are rarely original; in this instance, we already know that Nietzsche had long before (1876) claimed that "every man truly becomes an artist" by cooking up his own, self-inspired, Dionysiac "dream worlds."

Insistence upon the sacerdotal essence of modern art, simultaneously a rather arrogant and an essentially fallacious posture, was, however, a vanguard notion first widely proclaimed, then popularized in published art theory by the Symbolists. More to the immediate point, and as Dorothy Kosinski had shown us in some detail, they mainly framed the idea within a familiar, specifically Dionysiac-Orphic, context. The fallacy is that when the modernist Artist-as-Priest mission does occasionally work, that is, as a "politically productive force," it only does so with a very few people: those already convinced, the true-believers of vanguard art, the already *initiated*. With somewhat different nomenclature, the egregiously self-inflating idea—the Artist as Priest and Prophet—is still very much with us. But, as we remind the reader, it has always been there, in one guise or

²⁵ Beuys, as quoted in Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory*, 891–92, 903; his emphasis.

another, and ever since Ficino and the creation of Michelangelo's *Bacchus* (**fig. 1**).

In America, the historical precedent for the now ubiquitous, hubris-ridden, notion of avant-garde artist-priest-prophet conflation was probably first figuratively set in conceptual concrete by the Abstract Expressionists. For those sensitive-painterly luminaries attached to the "New York School" newly risen to prominence immediately after World War II, art was not a way to "make a living"; it was instead a vocation, a "calling." One particularly candid (but unfortunately unnamed) member of the vanguard vocation made the understood artist-priest connection plain: "We became artists, like entering the priesthood." Another painter, Larry Rivers, noted their noble poverty, claiming that "commercial success" for them was considered "meaningless," since their common endeavor was "like belonging to a church. Not receiving any [material] rewards for making art somehow made the [spiritual] concerns even stronger." Another prominent non-objective painter, Ad Reinhardt, even recommended that art schools, particularly those now becoming absorbed by state universities, become "correctional" institutions—just like cloistered monasteries: "The one purpose of the art-academy-university is the education and correction of the artist-as-artist. . . . The art college should be a cloister-ivy-hall-ivory-tower community of artists."²⁶

Evidently, that institutional setting ensures more effective *initiation*, or collective mind-control. Of more recent memory, perhaps the most egregious example of the spiritually charged artist produced the widely acclaimed "performance art" practised by Joseph Beuys, who happily called his significance-charged artistic "mission" that of an ancient "shaman," but whose activities were labeled by some less sympathetic, professional observers as perhaps representing mere "Jesus-Kitsch."²⁷ In any event, as I shall soon show, likewise the "inspired" performance-artist-shaman routine has been with us for centuries. The difference is that, now, you call it "art." And that denomination, of course, lends to the shamanistic act a wholly new cultural significance, also immense prestige. Its very prestige makes it seem worthy of emulation, *imitatio* or *mimesis*.

²⁶ Various artists, as cited by Collins, "Life Magazine and the Abstract Expressionists," 295 (and giving the published source for each quotation).

²⁷ Moffitt, *Occultism in Avant-Garde Art*, p. 144, giving the reference for Beuys' "Jesu-Kitsch."

This earnest playing out by a much lionized, radical avant-garde artist of his self-appointed messianic vocation, at least within the *standard* rhetoric attending so much of twentieth-century art expression, represents largely conventional stuff within the strictly modernist panorama. It is, however, also nothing new whatsoever within the broader span of the history of art. As we already read, indeed the provocative idea of God-like artistic creation could *appear*, at least to some much later theorists writing in the sixteenth century, to have represented already something like a commonplace within classical, Greek and Roman, literary theory. However, the real situation was otherwise; according to E. R. Curtius,

Ancient Greece put the poet in the category of "god-like men," alongside [non-artistic] heroes, kings, heralds, priest, seers. . . . [Nonetheless,] the Greeks did not know the concept of the creative imagination. They had no word for it. What the poet produced was a fabrication. Aristotle praises Homer for having taught poets "to lie properly" (*Poetics*, 1460 a, 19). For him, as we know, poetry was *mimesis*, "imitation," and indeed "imitation of *men* doing something" (*Poetics*, 1448 a, 1). Imitation can [only] present things [men] as they are or as they appear or as they ought to be (*Poetics*, 1460 b, 10–11), hence it is *not* to be understood as a copy of [human] nature but instead [only] as a rendering which can be a refashioning or a new fashioning.²⁸

Nonetheless, we are presently only interested in the rhetoric attending the strictly *modernist*, nearly mythic, manifestations of allusions to God-like artistic creation. Examples abound. In 1913, Guillaume Apollinaire states that the understood goal of *les peintres cubistes* was "to express the grandeur of metaphysical forms," to which end, "they discard more and more the old art of optical illusion and local proportion." Specifically due to this newly installed, collective drive to abstraction, "this is why contemporary art . . . possesses some of the characteristics of great, that is to say, religious art."²⁹ In 1914, Franz Marc proclaims the fact of "our European desire for abstract form," then adding that this kind of "art is our religion, our center of gravity, our truth."³⁰ In 1920, Paul Klee declares that the making of "art is a simile of the Creation," and as due to the opportune intervention of the god-like modern artist, "out of abstract elements a formal

²⁸ Curtius, *European Literature*, 397–98; emphasis mine.

²⁹ Apollinaire, as quoted in Chipp, *Theories*, 224.

³⁰ Marc, as quoted in *ibid.*, 180–81.

cosmos is ultimately created.” Moreover, this new abstract-formal picture “we discover to be so closely similar to the Creation, that to turn an expression of religious feelings, or religion itself, into reality a breath is sufficient.”³¹

Besides unilaterally designating himself to be a divinely *inspired* and/or god-like Creator, the modern artist also typically envisions himself to be a Prophet: he foresees the shape of the future and, typically by means of “the abstract spirit,” he leads the people (implicitly compliant) towards the promised Utopia. Wassily Kandinsky boldly proclaimed this prophetic-messianic function of the modern artist in 1911: “The abstract spirit takes possession first of a single [artistic] human spirit; later it governs an ever-increasing number of people. At this moment, individual artists are subject to the spirit of the time [*Zeitgeist*] which forces them to use particular forms related to each other and which, therefore, also possess an external similarity,” wholly abstract in this case.³² Nonetheless, it was the wholly different *Zeitgeist* of the Cinquecento which had provided, and just as we have seen, the cultural matrix initially giving birth to that modernist cult figure, the divinely *inspired* and/or god-like Creator.

In 1913, Apollinaire said very much the same thing as did Kandinsky in 1911: “Poets and artists plot the characteristics of their epoch, and the future docilely falls in line with their desire. . . . The energy of art imposes itself on [enlightened] men, and becomes for them the plastic standard of the period. . . . All the art works of an epoch end up resembling the more energetic, the more expressive, and the most typical art-works of the period.”³³ In 1915, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler spoke of Pablo Picasso as a representative “artist who is possessed of the divine gift, genius,” and who likewise provides “proof that the appearance of the aesthetic product is conditioned in its particularity by the spirit of the time. . . . The artist, as the [self-appointed] executor of the unconscious plastic will of mankind, identifies himself with the style of the period, which is the expression of this [collective] will.”³⁴

All of these familiar slogans are, however, essentially “old hat”; indeed, such notions can be traced back to the very foundations of

³¹ Klee, as quoted in *ibid.*, 186.

³² Kandinsky, as quoted in *ibid.*, 157.

³³ Apollinaire, as quoted in *ibid.*, 225.

³⁴ Kahnweiler, as quoted in *ibid.*, 252–3, 259.

the idea, as incarnated *verbum*, of the “avant-garde.” That provocative psychic entity, the word made flesh, had in fact been initially proclaimed in the third decade of the nineteenth century by Henri de Saint-Simon. With historical hindsight, it is interesting to observe how the term *avant-garde*, now so standard in English or German, is (of course) originally French. Particularly, it was borrowed from military usage, where it originally designated a sort of cavalry action, an armed reconnaissance, a perilous and fugitive sweep behind the front-lines, then directly into enemy territory. *Nomen est omen*: the larger program impelling the militant-esoteric front of the avant-garde is at once pseudo-militaristic and aggressive, utopian and revolutionary. All the rhetorical essentials of a forthcoming, prophetic and militarized (albeit uniformed in mufti), artistic avant-garde had been laid out well over a century and a half ago.

In 1845, a little-known Fourieriste, Gabriel-Desiré Laverdant, published an equally little-known treatise, *De la mission de l'art et du rôle des artistes*. In this presently obscure work, we find the same kind of prescription for messianic prophetic insight and radical action as those just quoted. Laverdant's is a precocious proclamation of the now-hackneyed themes of the initiatory function of art, likewise transforming it into a prognostic instrument for radical social action. All this is leading, so we are told, to something like moral reform for society entire. Some two thousand years ago, similarly noble impulses inspired the mostly martyred *acti apostolorum* (“Acts of the Apostles”). According to the new evangelical—and literally “initiating”—mission proposed by Laverdant way back in 1845,

Art, the expression of society, manifests, in its highest soaring, the most advanced social tendencies: it is the forerunner and the revealer. Therefore, to know whether art worthily fulfills its proper mission as initiator, where the artist becomes truly of the avant-garde, one must know where Humanity is itself going, know [as an artist] what the destiny of the human race actually is. . . . Along with the hymn to happiness [the advanced artist pictures] the dolorous and despairing ode. . . . To lay bare with a brutal brush all the brutalities, all the filth, which are the base of our society, this is the mission of the avant-garde artist.³⁵

Indeed, the role of the artist was already reckoned to be that of a biblical prophet; in fact, in 1841 Gérard de Nerval cited the historical

³⁵ Laverdant, as quoted in Poggioli, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 9.

example of “all the prophets and visionaries predicted in Revelations, among which I flatter myself to be one!”—“*tous les prophètes et voyants prédits par l’Apocalypse, dont je me flattais d’être l’un!*” Writing a bit later, Victor Hugo further elaborated on the role of the Poet-Artist as both Priest and Pontif, all as due to his artistic genius: “*Le poète est prêtre. Il y a ici-bas un pontife, c’est le génie [artistique]. Sacerdos magnus.*”³⁶ So said Laverdant, Nerval, Hugo, and many others like them of the proto-modernist persuasion. Amen.

Alas, like so many other modernist creation-myths, this Artist-Priest topos likewise has its real rhetorical roots in shopworn Renaissance theories of poetic creativity. Had any of the thronging modernist sloganeers bothered to peruse the once widely read *Discorsi* (1594) by Torquato Tasso, they would have long since known that:

The poet should be considered almost the same as the theologian. . . . Divine philosophy, or theology as we prefer to call it, has two parts, and each of them is adapted and fitted to one part of our mind, which is composed of the divisible and the indivisible. [According to Dionysus the pseudo-Areopagite] that part of occult theology that is contained in the sign, and which has the power of making one perfect, is fitting to the indivisible part of our soul, which is the intellect at its purest. . . . Thence it leads to the contemplation of divine things; and to move the audience in this way with images, as do the mystic theologian and the poet, is a much more noble work than is to teach by means of demonstration, which is the function of the scholastic theologian. The mystic theologian and the poet, therefore, are far more noble than any of the others.³⁷

Not surprisingly, the painters were soon to adopt the same lofty aims, and so they pretend to the same ethical status; so doing, they meant to acquire for themselves the same prestige accorded to the “theological poet.” In his treatise on *El arte de la pintura* (Seville, 1649), Francisco Pacheco emphatically stated that

The aim of the painter, in his capacity as an artisan, will be by means of his art to earn a living [and] the end of painting in general will be, by means of imitation, to represent a given subject with all the power and propriety possible. . . . The principal goal [of painting] will be to achieve a state of grace through the study and practise of this profession. . . . When painting is practised as a Christian work, it

³⁶ Hugo and Nerval, as quoted in Senior, *Way Down and Out*, 67, 75.

³⁷ Tasso, as in Wimsatt, *Literary Criticism*, 165.

acquires another, more noble form and, by means of it, thus it advances to the highest order of virtue. . . . Painting, which before [merely] had imitation as its sole aim, now, as an act of virtue, takes on new and rich trappings, elevating itself to a supreme end: the contemplation of eternal glory. . . . The goal of the Catholic painter is to endeavor, in the guise of a preacher, to persuade the people and to bring them, by means of his painting, to embrace religion. . . . Like the means of the orator, speaking appropriately and to the point, so too will his goal be to convince us. . . . The principal goal of Christian images will always be to persuade men to be pious, so to lead them to God.³⁸

Both of those statements are, however, just what one expects to hear expressed by sensitive minds shaped by Catholic Counter-Reformation culture, itself representing the *Götterdämmerung* ("twilight of the gods") of Renaissance Humanism. Nonetheless, that notion of a cultural correspondence is scarcely what you would have counted on to hear pronounced by the avatars of the secular avant-garde of the twentieth century! Nonetheless, the idea that proper mission of the modern artist "is to endeavor, in the guise of a preacher, to persuade the people" is just what you do frequently hear from them—and just as we have seen. In this case however, its resurgence is due to genuinely "modern" thinkers, the Symbolists of fin-de-siècle culture in France.

The "Artist-Priest-Prophet" Installed by French Symbolists and Occultists

The immediate historical source of the now ubiquitous, modern to post-modern, theory of the God-like, also prophetic and hubris-ridden, creator-artist is, specifically, Symbolist art theory. The prophetic obsession is then obvious, particularly as we have the well known example of a group of young Symbolist painters who called collectively themselves *les Nabis*, "the Prophets." Themselves tending towards precociously abstracted, "pure" figuration, their own role-model was Paul Gauguin (fig. 18). One additionally supposes that these artists (Sérusier, Denis, Bonnard, Ranson, Roussel, Vallatton, etc.) knew that the old Hebrew word, *nabi*, variously connoted (as in I Samuel 9:9, 19; 10:1, 6–13, 25), besides "prophet," also priest, prognosticator,

³⁸ Pacheco, *Arte de la pintura*, 252–53; for the cultural context of this statement, see Moffitt, *The Arts in Spain*.

deliverer-redeemer, magus, dream-interpreter, seer, and the divinely-designated, also properly “inspired,” spokesman for Yahweh-God. Today, all that impressive job-description cataloguing can be collapsed collectively into “shaman,” a vocational title adopted by, among various other avant-garde artists, Joseph Beuys (figs. 24, 25).

For further confirmation of a polyvalent *nabi-prophète* thesis, we have, for instance, the earlier, and rather typical, precedent of Gauguin himself in 1888 (fig. 18). Besides proclaiming a Symbolist given, that “art is an abstraction,” Gauguin then adds another, by-then routine, commonplace, namely, that “creating like our Divine Master is the only way of rising toward God.”³⁹ Thus, it seemed only fitting that Gilbert-Albert Aurier would later refer, in 1890, to Vincent van Gogh (fig. 12) as “a terrible, maddened genius, often sublime, sometimes grotesque, always near the brink of the pathological.” That trait of “maddened genius” was of course a positive factor: by 1890, it was the natural result of *Inspiration*. An even more positive creative attribute was the Dutchman’s heroic and self-sacrificing world-mission, as: “a messiah, a sower of truth, one who would regenerate the decrepitude of our art, and perhaps of our imbecilic and industrial society, [for] he has delighted in imagining a renewal of art.”⁴⁰

In this case, especially it is to certain, widely read, mid-nineteenth-century *occultist* writers to whom credit must actually be given for having initially attributed, as Dorothy Kosinski recognizes, “an extremely important role to the artist-prophet or artist-priest in deciphering the symbolic correspondences and thus revealing the higher forms of reality.”⁴¹ As she also points out, most of these overtly esoteric writers began by situating their argument within a familiar, ancient Hellenic, or specifically Dionysiac, precedent. For instance, in 1891 there appeared in a popular occultist review of the Symbolist period, *La Voile d’Isis*, republication of a much earlier appraisal rendered by Antoine Fabre d’Olivet (1768–1825) concerning the religious origins, and thus functions, of the art of poetry:

³⁹ Gauguin, in Chipp, *Theories*, 60. Much the same was said by a famed contemporary architect, Antonio Gaudí, so making him, along with many other shared cultural traits, a figure usefully illustrative of the goals of an important, international artistic phenomenon (previously undefined), the “architecture of Symbolism”; see Moffitt, “Architecture as Primeval Expression.”

⁴⁰ Aurier, as given in Nochlin, *Impressionism and Post-Impressionism*, 136–37.

⁴¹ Kosinski, *Orpheus*, 59.

From the early ages of Greece, Poetry—consecrated to the services of the altar—only left the confines of the temples in order to provide [spiritual] instruction for the people: It was [therefore] like a sacred language, through which the priests, charged with presiding over the mysteries of religion, translated the will of the gods. One [therefore] gave the name *Poésie* to this sacred language [and art].⁴²

Likewise, a contemporary of Fabre d'Olivet, Saint Yves d'Alveydre, had stated, so providing poetry with similarly Dionysiac origins and functions, that the divinely inspired artist-creator represented nothing less than "the generic genius of divine genius, the maker of spaces, the archetype, the poet-god, god [himself] speaking."⁴³

The ideas routinely expressed by influential French occultists, such as these ones writing earlier during the Romantic era, appear directly related, and in both their moment and their message, to the first known statement incorporating the term "avant-garde" with specific reference to an advanced, or implicitly modern, kind of art. In this statement, antedating Laverdant's proclamation of the "Mission of Art and Artists," we shall also find that initially the term was used figuratively to designate specifically radical or advanced activity operating concurrently in both the *social* and the *artistic* realms. This Utopian association, to which was directly added the messianic, literally "priestly," connection, was significantly to become—and still remains—a rhetorical commonplace in much twentieth-century art theory.

As argued by Henri de Saint-Simon (1760–1825), the "priestly" function of specifically "avant-garde" art is blatant: "It is we artists who will serve you as an *avant-garde*. . . . The power of the arts is in fact most immediate and most rapid: when we wish to spread new ideas among men, we inscribe them on marble or on canvas. . . . What a magnificent destiny for the arts is that of exercising a positive power over society, a true priestly function, and of marching forcefully in the van of all intellectual faculties." Such literally "vanguard" notions, which particularly assume that there was indeed a "revelatory" and apostolic "mission of art," and which mission is itself directly postulated upon "initiation," quickly became commonplace. For instance, and as we have just seen, there is the often cited

⁴² Fabre d'Olivet, as quoted in *ibid.*, 63.

⁴³ D'Alveydre, as quoted in *ibid.*, 63.

example of Gabriel-Desiré Laverdant, as given in his *De la mission de l'art et du rôle des artistes* (1845):

Art, the expression of society, manifests, in its highest soaring, the most advanced social tendencies; it is the forerunner and the revealer. Therefore, to know whether art worthily fulfills its proper mission as initiator, whether the artist is truly of the *avant-garde*, one must know where Humanity is going, know what the destiny of the human race is.⁴⁴

However, if one were to specify a single *locus classicus* (here meaning a literally “classical source”) for these statements that pointedly referred to the prophetic and crowd-controlling, “poet-god of divine genius,” especially some later made by the Symbolists, then the most likely source would be another passage in Euripides’s *Bacchae*: “Now this god [Dionysus] is a prophet; in the Bacchic state and in Maenad frenzy there is much of mantic art, for when the god has entered deeply into mankind he makes his maniacs speak of things that are as yet to be” (vv. 298–301). But all such notions regarding Bacchic divine intoxication and “inspired prophecy,” the kind “making his maniacs speak” of future events, were already well entrenched in standard French literature.

We have, for instance, the example of François Rabelais’s posthumously published *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1564). Towards the close of Book V (chapters 39, 40), the witty author drew an imaginative, typically Renaissance, *ekphrasis* of: “Bacchus’s Victory over the Indians, as Represented in the Mosaic-Work of the Temple.” Further on, in the conventional Renaissance fashion Rabelais states (V, chs. 45–47) that “Bacchus holds all truth, for truth is in [his] wine”; “by wine one grows divine; there is no surer argument, no art of divination less fallacious”; “the Greek *oinos* is like *vis*: force and strength, for it has the power to fill the soul with all truth, all knowledge, and all philosophy,” further stirring “the fit divine, poetic frenzy . . . since his brain is inspired by wine.” Once the poet finds himself “cheered by Bacchic enthusiasm,” for “the truth lies hidden in [Bacchic] wine,” then likewise “the whole art of divining” lies at hand, and so forth.⁴⁵ All of these literary tropes were, of course, earlier illustrated by Michelangelo’s *Bacchus* (fig. 1).

⁴⁴ Saint-Simon and Laverdant, as cited in Nochlin, “The Invention of the Avant-Garde: France, 1830–80,” 5–6.

⁴⁵ Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, 705–7; for Rabelais’s *ekphrasis* of the Hellenistic mosaic, see 691–94.

A Modernist Proclivity: Art-Worship

Since we have just witnessed the matter of the opportune installation of an “Artist-Priest-Prophet” by the French Symbolists and Occultists, it seems only fitting there would be simultaneously initiated a complementary syndrome, “Art-Worship.” As we shall see, and such as the symbiotic relationship is enacted today, Artist-Priests administer their eucharistic instruments—“art”—and then the public, a modernist mass-audience, dutifully worships at the figurative altar placed within their temple, an art museum or gallery. Viewed historically, this proclivity, the kind treating the museum as a “Temple of Art,” was institutionalized with the opening in Berlin of Karl Friedrich Schinkel’s Altes Museum in 1830.⁴⁶ Although in the minority, we have seen that there are those today (for instance, Robert Hughes) who recognize that *worship*, or an egregiously exaggerated estimation of “art,” has itself become, and since at least the mid-nineteenth century, something like a significant modernist alternative-religion for the bourgeoisie. This phenomenon can be illustrated further.

The historical roots of this numinous perception can, however, be easily traced much further back, for instance, to the Middle Ages. Then, however, “art” did not enjoy either this title or anything remotely like the kind of perceptual autonomy characterizing its prestigious mass-cultural reception today. A characteristic, meaning non-autonomous, contemporary evaluation of medieval art would be the one expressed by St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1091–1153). Particularly, it was he who regarded in a negative way the aesthetic splendors of contemporary Gothic cathedrals, “namely the vast height of your churches, their immoderate length, their superfluous breadth, the costly finish, the curious carvings and paintings which attract the worshipper’s gaze and hinder his attention” from properly non-materialist or other-worldly objects of meditation.⁴⁷

The particular *ad hominem* target for Bernard’s animosity was most likely Abbot Suger (1081–1151). Suger was the creative force behind the emergence of a distinctive aesthetic mode belonging to what is

⁴⁶ For an excellent discussion of this building and its symbolic valences, see Ziolkowski, *German Romanticism and Its Institutions*, Chapter 6, “The Museum: Temple of Art.”

⁴⁷ Bernard, as in Holt, *Documentary History*, 19–21.

today recognized as the first truly “Gothic” edifice, the magnificent choir installed (1140–44) in the Abbey-Church of St.-Denis in Paris. (**fig. 20**) In an eloquently argued apologia for his splendid, multimedia, “modern work” (so designated: *opus modernum*), Suger shows himself the staunch defender of what is recognized to constitute a new artistic consciousness. According to its distinctive terminology, this new perceptual syndrome involves the “mystical path” (*anagogicus mos*), a method of metaphysical “elevation” through material splendor. In this application, “harmony and radiance” (*compactio et claritas*) attribute to material works of art an invisible psychic power conducive to the perceiver’s spiritual enlightenment. This is a precociously pre-modernist kind of “empowerment,” namely that hidden force which “transports one from material objects to immaterial matters” (*de materialibus ad immaterialia transferendo*).⁴⁸ Suger had achieved the seemingly impossible: he made architecture into the material vehicle for a Christian kind of Dionysiac “transport.”

Today, you don’t go to a Gothic cathedral—especially in America, where the genuine article (**fig. 20**) is, in any event, non-existent—for a spiritually salutary infusion of *anagogicus mos*. Instead, you should go downtown, to your metropolitan museum. The independent urban museum has become the main symbolic focus of civic pride. Supported by newly legislated but unprecedented tax advantages, underwritten by government agencies and prestige-hungry corporations, policed by art historians and their harried graduate students, the independent urban museum has become the temple of the newly designed official culture of America. Surprisingly (at least to me), more Americans go to museums than actually attend football games (which, however, they surreptitiously watch on TV). Hughes asserts (and this seems acceptable to me) that “the museum has very largely supplanted the church as the emblematic focus of the American city [:] Transcendentalism teaches us that art refines, educates, makes people better.”⁴⁹

It was (and still is) otherwise in Europe, where nearly all major museums are State-run and Government-funded. Either way, by the end of the 1970s, and particularly in America, these supportive agencies probably gave vanguard-modernist art-figuration the strongest, equally physical and psychological, support that any living art had

⁴⁸ Suger, in *ibid.*, 22–33.

⁴⁹ Hughes, *Nothing If Not Critical*, 389, also citing attendance figures.

ever known; the only historical competition might be found in Pharaonic Egypt or Baroque Rome. Naturally, near universal acceptance did away with, equally, both the traditional “outsider” stigma and the conventional “vanguard” status traditionally accorded to modern art. In short, a raw psychic shock, once routinely attached to what is since become The Old—meaning “old” as art-*historical* innovation—has since become the radical chic of The Newest: endless novelties promoted by art-marketing and feeding current consumption.

Once that happened, whatever one did subsequently, art-wise and otherwise, became necessarily “*post-modernist*,” meaning an *after*-event or, better, a “spectacle,” one generally unfolding *inside* the Establishment. As Timothy Luke additionally points out, art exhibitions are increasingly “staged,” like so much contemporary performance art, so often becoming “political texts rife with conflicted rhetoric about the ideologies of the present. Art exhibitions in the last analysis are elaborate and expensive works of educational theater with their own special rhetorical agendas and peculiar political teachings. . . . The art of particular decades, ethnic groups, regions or nations then is repackaged as ethnography, political rhetoric, or as cultural norms for contemporary audiences.”⁵⁰

Just as Periclean Athens had its spiritually elevated, sacred Acropolis, so too below it the classical world needed its crass counterpart, the Agora, for the worship of ritualized commercial transactions. Likewise, in postmodernist American cities, the hushed and typically architecturally austere, art museum represents an upper-end, spiritual-cultural, archetype. Its commercial equivalent—as a social anti-type—is the lower-class, gaudy and wholly materialist, thronged and noisy, architecturally bombastic, shopping-mall. In the particularly prestigious case of the metropolitan museum, either way, whether in America or in Europe, this is become an institution. This art-temple is now officially established, according to a typical exhibition-reviewer, Georges Salles, writing in 1956 (among many other examples one could cite to similar ends), as the privileged “place where a drowsy visitor is thrilled by contact with sublime works of art.” This same enthusiastic journalist adds that the uniquely modern “museum has the privilege of speaking the language of the times, which is a language [that

⁵⁰ Luke, *Shows of Force*, 1, 3.

is, 'art'] intelligible to all the same in every country. The museum has become part of our way of life: soon it will be the necessary complement and parallel to all our activities."⁵¹ As was once the orthodox-modernist art museum, so too is the post-modernist commercial mall now.

As did Suger in the mid-twelfth century, in these hallowed, architecturally ostentatious, exhibition-halls we, too, can glimpse the New Jerusalem, that is, the advent of a prophesied Kingdom of Art on Earth. Just like the medieval religion of the works of God on earth and in heaven, the modernist religion of art also has its eloquent fundamentalists. According to either expert, medieval theologian or modernist art critic, what is deemed worth the effort is an attempt towards a *unio mystica*, with either (then) God or with (now) the inspired *objet d'art*. In either case (or time), the expert first presupposes consecration as an important activity in itself and, second, he proposes knowledge of certain procedures to be industriously acquired by instruction, exercise, devotion and habit. In either case—love of God or love of Art—what emerges is a clear sense of the Chosen; by an invisible but insuperable cultural barrier, either kind of *amateur* ("lover") is tacitly separated from those who have not yet received this particularized effusion of grace and emotional attachment. Centuries ago, the sacred precinct of Dionysus provided the divine infusion to the *hoi polloi*. Just as the sacred once did to the profane, the world of museum-oriented aesthetics today tacitly—meaning in spite of a spate of late-to-post-modernist verbalization to the contrary—opposes itself to the humdrum world of everyday life, probably having its most emblematic locus in the mundane mall.

The tangible signs discovering the coeval sanctity of, equally, the cathedral and the art museum are unmistakable. In either case (or either sacred edifice), the shared characteristics are: an implicit inviolability of the object-relics displayed, a reverential hush which automatically imposes itself upon tip-toeing visitors, a puritan asceticism of minimalist amenities, a nearly systematic absence of external explanatory texts (you are already expected to be properly apprised of the transcendental significance of the displayed relics), the grandiose or awe-inspiring solemnity of the architectural *mise-en-scène*, and so forth. All these physical conditions are expressive of a significant liminal experience implicitly belonging to an invisible symbolic transi-

⁵¹ Salles, as in Frascina and Harris, *Art in Modern Culture*, 175–76.

tion from the inferior profane sphere, thence upward—*anagogicus mos*—into the quasi-sacred zone of transcendental perception and transfigurational revelation. The latter displays the divine relics resulting from numinous *Inspiration*.

Due to its acquired, implicitly sacred character, the officially designated “work of art” demands particular physical dispositions or mental predispositions from the catechumen. If they receive the proper *initiation*, so shall they attain the desired *ecstasy* and *transport*, in short *Inspiration*—just as it was experienced by (for instance) Walter Pater and Clive Bell. There is an understood promise: to those fully initiated, modernist acolytes who do faithfully fulfill all their sectarian requirements, in return Art will eventually bestow its ineffable privileges. The Chosen are themselves elected by their instilled ability to respond automatically, by the numbers, to a by-now traditional introit, *Introibo ad altare (artis)*. One is legitimized by the approach itself, the elitist path to revelation, the *apocalypsis* of true Inspiration, the very existence of which remains unknown to unknowing cultural barbarians. We are additionally familiar with the architecturalized territories, cultural reservations, conventionally assigned to either urban tribe, the knowing and the clueless: either Museum or Mall.

All this was, however, observed as early as 1969 by two aghast Frenchmen, Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel:

Love of art [*l'amour de l'art*] is the clear mark of the chosen, separating, by an invisible and insuperable barrier, those who are touched by it from those who have not received this grace. It [serves] to reinforce for some the feeling of belonging and, for others, the feeling of exclusion. In these sacred places of art, where bourgeois society deposits relics inherited from a past which is not its own, everything leads to the conclusion that the world of art opposes itself to the world of everyday life, just as the sacred does to the profane. The untouchability of objects, the religious silence which imposes itself on visitors, the puritan asceticism of the amenities, always sparse and rather uncomfortable, the quasi-systematic absence of any information, the grandiose solemnity of decor and decorum: colonnades, huge galleries, painted ceilings, monumental stairways, all seem to serve as reminders of the transition from the profane to the sacred world. . . . If, by its sacred nature, the work of art requires particular dispositions or predispositions, in return it bestows its sanction on those who satisfy these requirements, bestows this upon the chosen, who are themselves chosen by their [unique] ability to respond to its call.⁵²

⁵² Bourdieu and Darbel, in *ibid.*, 179–80.

Presently, well over thirty years later, we recognize another, perhaps manipulative, aspect to the art museum. According to the post-modernist perspective of Richard Leppert,

The official rhetoric about art commonly promulgated by the art-world demands that art be contemplated; the ubiquitous temple-like architecture of many museums, including the newest, makes explicit the demand for reverence. . . . Museum staffs make judgments for us about what will be displayed and where. Those pictures that make the “cut” are hung in a hierarchy of judged significance. . . . They convey different meanings than images receiving less obvious official attention.

It takes only a visit or two to an art museum to learn that a specific etiquette attaches itself to looking at art, involving the stated or unstated demand that we speak softly, in reverential tones, that we never touch—the oils on our skin are detrimental to such objects—and that we not say anything stupid about a painting within earshot of someone else who might after be more expert. Beauty demands respect. All this necessarily has an impact on what we look at and how we will tend to see it; but all of it is the product of decisions made for us by others.⁵³

One can go even further, now assigning specific psychological values to this kind of quasi-religious participation in a now rather commonplace avant-garde *mentalité*. Donald Kuspit points out the currently entrenched role of the “modernist artist as the symbol of heroic resistance to all that is oppressive and corrupt in bourgeois civilization,” with the standard result now being “an adulatory fetishization of the artist as such.”⁵⁴ Resting on laurels garnered since the Renaissance, “in sum, the myth of the avant-garde artist involves the belief that he is *initiated* into the mysteries of primordial experience [:] he is more spontaneous—primordially expressive—than anyone else.” A key component of this grandiose mentality is a “mysticism of the [artistic] medium,” which “induces hallucinatory images,” allowing the ecstatic artist “to fuse symbolically with the medium,” due to his unique “kind of habitual intoxication.” All of this is obviously just another manifestation of the enduring, but typically unspoken, Dionysiac syndrome of “inspired” *intoxification*, *transport*, *ecstasy*, and *initiation*.

Although we have found much earlier, specifically “Dionysian,” sources for such notions of creative “*initiation*,” Kuspit had assigned major responsibility to Friedrich Nietzsche. So will we, but only for

⁵³ Leppert, *Art and the Committed Eye*, 13–14.

⁵⁴ For the remarks following, see Kuspit, *Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist*, 1–19.

certain notions that had already become commonplaces in the nineteenth century. As Kuspit did not do, we have traced all of these ideas back to the Renaissance, particularly to the Neoplatonic gospels amended by Marsilio Ficino. Whereas the writings of the Humanists remain mostly virgin territory for the avatars of postmodernist creativity, they, blithely unknowing, still bear the burden of their largely forgotten Dionysian heritage.

For instance, Kuspit relates that it was Nietzsche, as read by Joseph Beuys (among many others), who had described at some length the role of "the artist-healer." Moreover, it was Nietzsche who had especially underscored the function of the artist-healer's "aesthetic state as one of hallucination or hallucinatory exaggeration, brought on by self-intoxication." And, before Nietzsche, there was, says Kuspit, "Friedrich Schlegel's conception of artists as 'Brahmins, a higher caste: ennobled not by birth but by free self-consciousness,' and 'at the threshold of things'." Kuspit believed, and with good reason, that such commonplace poses have long since "become a farce." In effect, but as he did not bother to do, we have just been shown exactly how these now routine impostures represent *historical* commonplaces, *topoi* which have been circulating for centuries: *nihil novum sub sole*.

Regarding the new guises of artistic "inspiration," more particularly we recall how Kuspit had acidly observed how avant-garde allegiance represents a "belief system," one which psychologically aligns itself with membership in (non-artistic) *cults*, that is, "occultism," another ubiquitously modernist social phenomenon. Both kinds of spiritual tribes, or "charismatic groups," reveal, as he notes, the following "psychological elements" in common: "(1) a shared belief system, and (2) they sustain a high level of social cohesiveness, (3) are strongly influenced by the group's behavioral norms, and (4) impute charismatic or sometimes divine power to the group or its leadership." These were all "modernist" traits that we have just shown to have been widely broadcast by Éliphas Lévi around 1860.

As Kuspit also noted, such avant-garde "ideological totalism," the kind committed to "milieu control," commonly employs "mystical manipulation or planned spontaneity." Likewise, both kinds of tribal expression are characterized by "the demand for purity and the cult of confession." Other standard operational features observed by Kuspit in the "cult" of modernist creation-myths are "sacred science," "the loading of the language," and "the principle of doctrine over person."

In sum, “no longer is the avant-garde artist [like Beuys, for instance] simply a defiant figure idealized by intellectuals; he is, rather, a cultic presence embraced by the world.” Again, especially the research on the Occult Establishment published by James Webb has documented in detail the real physiognomy of modern occultism, also implicitly recommending its study by art historians who need a better grip on the real historical essence of modernism, particularly the forgotten sources for many of its unique mental traits and biases.

This mass-psychological digression relating to the contemporary “audience culture” for vanguard art may now lead us back to our proper task, an exposure of certain concrete events allowing us to treat the history of art as just another, largely *material*, aspect of history itself. We dare to treat historical events as such, even, for that matter, *inspiration* itself. If, for instance, we expose modern art as often apeing religion—*ars simia religionis*, we exhibit this self-deluding effect as historians, not as complicit theologians. In this case, we may now turn our attention to a historical, meaning objective or non-partisan, consideration of a quintessential genre of “inspired” post-modernist avant-garde art, “performance pieces.” These ritualized enactments we may view as, in effect, very specialized diversions concocted for an elite class of *cognoscenti*. In particular, the widely acclaimed and ever-enigmatic *Aktionen* of Joseph Beuys functionally belong to—or at least certainly have developed from—this tradition. Maybe to the surprise of some, we find that the late modern performance tradition is one going back at least to the Renaissance and, particularly in Beuys’s case, all the way back to Hellenistic Greece and its cultic Dionysiac Mysteries. But first we must examine an intermediary phenomenon: Surrealism.

CHAPTER TEN

SURREALIST DIONYSIAN MYTH AND GESTURAL PERFORMANCE ART

"Automatism" and the Dionysus of the Surrealists

Following upon the Orphic figures so beloved of the Symbolists, a revived Bacchus reappears in the twentieth century. Now, whenever the ancient emblem of Dionysus is re-evoked to inspire (for us) a strictly "modern" kind of art-making, his reappearance seems again mainly due to the widely publicized writings of that perhaps unexpected theorist of the automatist avant-garde, Friedrich Nietzsche.¹ In spite of an open acknowledgement of his inspirational debt to Nietzsche as one of the "prophets" of Surrealism, André Breton, the so-called "Pope of Surrealism," seems never to have dwelt long upon the figure of Bacchus in his own extensive writings.² Even without citing directly the ancient god of creative ecstasy and intoxication, Breton repeatedly advocated, besides the employment of a multifaceted "collective myth" of the age, what may be specifically called conventional "Bacchic principles."

However we (or M. Breton) may choose to label them, the traditional, even essential, attributes of the ecstatic Dionysiac experience necessarily included, and just as they always had, a host of complementary phenomena. Those conventional Bacchic principles include: a heavy dose of madness and the irrational, creative freedom, initiation and esoterica, dream-states and unconscious expression, psychic liberation, self-knowledge (*gnosis*), preoccupation with figurative generative forces, animism and vitalism, the search for Oneness, the pursuit of a Higher Truth, magical practises, rapture and emotional transport, supernatural interventions, the ecstatic experience, prehistoric or primordial consciousness (that is, "primitivism"

¹ For this phenomenon, see mainly Foster, *Heirs of Dionysus*.

² I have looked for such references, without success, in two anthologies of Breton's collected writings: Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*; *Surrealism and Painting*.

in modern academic parlance), spiritual transformation and metamorphosis, integration (*coincidentia oppositorum*), and so on and so forth. All that, of course, constitutes the standard, and published, agenda of the Surrealists in France and elsewhere. The basic Bacchic programme was, however, first published in the Hellenistic *koiné*, and well over two-thousand years ago. It was only logical, therefore, that the polyvalent figure of Bacchus would have been directly picked up, and so cited, by other notable Surrealists, and, once again, for them the central *topos* (cliché) is “poetic madness.”³

A crucial year seems to be 1933, when Walter Otto’s *Dionysus: Mythos und Kultus* was published in Frankfurt. This was also the year in which André Masson produced two abstract paintings entitled *Bacchanale* and *Petite Tragédie*. Both works introduced into his oeuvre, as Whitney Chadwick puts it, “the image of the ancient god Dionysus, to whom the artist had been introduced by Nietzsche,” and specifically in his *Birth of Tragedy*.⁴ Chadwick characterizes the formal appearance and underlying content of Masson’s *Bacchanale* as including “the whirling patterns of a world mad with erotic excess, while the fluid line that delineates the figures appears charged with powerful erotic currents [and so] the god Dionysus appears here in his incarnation as the god of the vine, of fertility, drunkenness, and erotic passion.” She also specifically points out that “the Dionysiac model” was employed by the Surrealists “as a means of circumventing reason.” In the more particular sense, “in Surrealism, Eros and Ecstasy are also intimately connected, with one another and with madness [and] this equating of erotic ecstasy and madness in Surrealism derived from the Dionysus myth.”⁵

In 1936, Masson and Georges Bataille founded a new Surrealist publication, *Acéphale* (“The Headless Being”). The January 1937 issue of *Acéphale* was, in fact, exclusively devoted to Nietzsche, also including long passages from *La Philosophie à l’époque tragique de la Grèce* (some as yet unpublished in French). These extracts declared a typically

³ On this aspect in particular, see Matthews, *Surrealism, Insanity, and Poetry*.

⁴ For what immediately follows I am most indebted to Chadwick, *Myth in Surrealist Painting*, ch. 3, “Dionysos: The Myth of Ecstasy,” 49–60 (Masson’s paintings are reproduced in her figs. 45, 46); for complementary Orphic references by notable Surrealists, see also Kosinski, *Orpheus*, 253–68. Although more could probably be said on the subject, I know of no other monographic treatments explaining the way the Surrealists employed the malleable Bacchic myth.

⁵ Chadwick, *Myth in Surrealist Painting*, 52, 53.

Nietzschean view of art—the kind placing irrationality above reason, and feeling above thought—and, naturally, Nietzsche specifically had employed *Dionysus* in order to personify concretely these essentially abstract but actively psycho-aberrant or “mindless” (acephalic) traits. As presented in *Acéphale* early in 1937, the particular relevancy of the lengthy quotations from the German philosopher was to represent—in France, and from that moment onwards—the standard Surrealist characterization of Dionysus. The third and fourth issues of this same journal, *Acéphale*, further extended the Bacchic parameters by publishing materials contained in Walter Otto’s often too imaginative (versus strictly philological) treatise on the Greek god. In fact, the portions translated for the Surrealist journal were wholly devoted to the god Dionysus in his narrower aspect—as the frenetic and possessed god of death and rebirth.

Like Walter Otto, Masson and Bataille argued that *their* Dionysus was likewise “an intoxicated god, a mad god,” for which reason he was given the artistically significant title of “the Liberator.”⁶ Otto—who also read Nietzsche, avidly—emphatically stated that Dionysus’ divine nature was “madness”; in fact his was a *Verrücktheit* that Otto viewed as being inherent in, perhaps even essential to the world itself. Neither a sickness nor degeneracy, this kind of Bacchic *manía* was a companion to perfect health in the mad modern world of the Surrealists. Otto stresses that Dionysus’s role was that of a frenetic deity who possesses man and renders him a savage, that he is the god of the persecuted, the suffering and the dying. In so doing, Otto’s perhaps misdirected effort to define what the Greeks had called *manía* became what Carl Kerényi dismisses as “a kind of visionary attempt to explain a state in which man’s vital powers are enhanced to the utmost, in which consciousness and the unconscious merge in a breakthrough.”⁷

As Kerényi recognized, rather than archaeology, this is pure Nietzsche. The result was that one of the contributors to *Acéphale*, Jules Monnerot, was moved to exclaim how “one sees that the problem posed by the modern and Nietzschean myth of Dionysios, whether it be fiction or truth, is not one to be viewed through the colors of a distant past but instead in order better to embrace the future.”⁸

⁶ Otto, *Dionysos: Myth and Cult*, 49.

⁷ Kerényi, *Dionysos: Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life*, 134.

⁸ Monnerot, “Dionysos philosophe”: “On voit que le problème de la fiction ou

Such was also the picture of the mostly “mad Dionysus,” a prophetic means by which “better to embrace the future,” that were entertained after 1937 by the Surrealists and their subsequent Bacchic followers, who were legion (including Jackson Pollock, dubbed “Jack the Dripper” in the popular press: **figs. 22, 23**).

Rounding off our observations about the modernist Bacchic phenomena, particularly by recalling those historical texts celebrating an ecstatic state of “creative intoxication,” yet another comment may be quickly made regarding the strictly literary effects. In short, many, but almost not quite all, of the poets I have known were drunks. Perhaps, in the case of the ones I have personally known, that condition of soggy inebriation common to them was merely a result of the fact that they, commonly, remained largely unpublished. And when tenuously in print, typically they had paid for that dubious distinction out of their very own, typically threadbare, pockets. Similarly, their typically tenuous (or largely untenured) affiliation with the bizarre and stressful world of provincial American Academia, an alienated pseudo-intellectual outback which itself usually constitutes an ideologically ambiguous nesting place, must be reckoned a significant contributing factor. That alone (*per se ipsum*) would (should) drive any sensitive soul to drink, *oinos* or even stronger.

Nonetheless, a great many of the “major,” or considerably published and critically well received, poets (none of whom did I ever personally know) are on record as having been notorious dipsomaniacs. Among the intoxicated notables, perhaps most famed are Edgar Allen Poe, Jack London, Eugene O’Neill, Thomas Wolfe, Dylan Thomas, W. H. Auden, among many others.⁹ Nonetheless, as far as I know, none of these modernist luminaries and luses had ever actually read Marsilio Ficino’s exaltations of the intoxicating Bacchus belonging to, sometimes even directly *inspiring*, Renaissance letters

de la vérité ne se pose pas à propos du mythe moderne et nietzschéen de Dionysos que, prospectif non retrospectif, ne se teint par des couleurs d’un lointain passé que pour mieux éteindre l’avenir.”

⁹ Although the literature on the subject (i.e., modern poet-drunks) is ample, I need only cite three recent monographs on the subject: Dardis, *The Thirsty Muse*; Gilmore, *Equivocal Spirits*; Goodwin, *Alcohol and the Writer*; see also Rothenberg, *Creativity and Madness*, ch. 10, “The Muse in the Bottle.” A cursory MLA CD-ROM search reveals, for instance, some 75 journal-articles on “Alcoholism”, many appearing in a specialized journal, founded in 1988, the title of which provides interesting insights on the ubiquity—and acknowledged historical source—of the cultural phenomenon: *Dionysos: The Literature and Intoxication Tri-Quarterly*.

and art (and as so analyzed in Chapter 5). Now better informed about the range of artistic effects potentially attributable to the Bacchic heritage initiated by Renaissance philosophical speculation, we may make brief mention of another topic recognized to be absolutely essential to the strictly modernist conception of advanced art making.

In this case, the other essential Dionysiac effect is pure “Automatism,” a well known, even crucial, modernist mind-set generating specific artistic operations immediately resulting in an often praiseworthy “Image made by Chance.” Viewed contextually, orthodox-modernist, artistic Automatism is clearly complementary—for being similarly uncontrolled by reason—to the divinely inspired, Bacchic-Dionysiac states of madness, ecstasy, and creative intoxication long since attributed to the greatest (so designated) of the poets and painters. According to many well regarded artists and art critics, it is from this similarly inspired state, *l’automatisme psychique* (so dubbed by André Breton), that presently there arises—like overheated, upwelling surges of molten magma rent from the very bowels of Mother Gea—that most desirable, deliriously neo-Dionysiac, avant-garde modernist pictorial-verbal product, “The Artistic Image Made by Chance.” But that further development, obviously a factor crucial to any comprehensive definition of modernist art-making, still awaits careful scholarly scrutiny and a definitive monographic treatment.¹⁰

¹⁰ I am now finishing work on a comprehensive historical study of various celebrations of the “chance effect” in art-making. The first systematic (but very brief) contextual analyses of these materials was published in 1934 by Kris and Kurz, *Die Legende vom Künstler*; see esp. 52–55, “Formen des Zufall” and “Zufallsbildungen”; some of their aperçus were usefully elaborated by Janson, “The Image Made by Chance in Renaissance Thought” (Janson here mentioned that he was then, 1961, working on a fuller account, which, alas, never appeared); see also Baltrusaitis, *Aberrations*, 60–105, “Pictorial Stones,” about some lithic imagery commonly attributed in the Renaissance to the operations of “chance.” For a monographic analysis of the *early* manifestations of strictly modernist, 20th-century, manifestations of aleatory creation (in fact, the only attempt at a comprehensive historical analysis of the subject in modern art known to me), see Watts, *CHANCE: A Perspective on Dada* (unfortunately, none of the older historical texts, nor any of their modern supporting commentaries, are mentioned in Watts’ flawed, in various ways, study; especially missed here, for instance, is reference to one well known source of Breton’s “psychic automatism,” a psychological study published in 1889 by Pierre Janet, *L’Automatisme psychologique*); for other explorations of “chance” and “automatism” in Janet’s time, in this case drawings created by the insane (!), see Will-Levaillant, “L’analyse des dessins d’aliénés et de médiums avant le Surréalisme.” For the conscious employment of “chance effects” by various influential *later* modernist artistic luminaries—John Cage, Jean Tinguely, Robert Rauschenberg, Merce Cunningham;

Without the established tradition of a *topos* of artistic "Inspiration"—here specifically meaning the post-Renaissance kind largely derived from initiated "ecstasy" and as most conveniently figured by Bacchic intoxication—it is doubtful that we would presently find so many published celebrations of a uniquely modernist kind of creative phenomenon. In this case, it is the Bacchic tradition of frenzied artistic inspiration which actually established the most pertinent historical precedent for the twentieth-century operational motif of "Automatism," the principal product of which is the artistic "image made by chance."

To sum up the understood place of *l'automatisme psychique* within the venerable Dionysiac heritage, we may review the acknowledged, broader and enduring, consequences of the ancient Dionysian legacy. As summed up by M. H. Abrams in his fundamental study on the contributions of classical literary criticism to subjective, and so "modern," Romantic poetic theory, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953),

Poetic inspiration (or, in its Greek form, "enthusiasm") is the oldest, most widespread, and most persistent account of poetic invention. If we compare the various forms in which the doctrine has been presented over the centuries, we find a recurrent area of agreement amid differences. Where poets and apologists for poetry largely agree is in their description of the facts of an extraordinary experience, to which at least some poets are susceptible while composing; where they differ is in the [specific] theory they would adduce to explain these facts.

all supposedly indebted to an exemplary precedent set by Marcel Duchamp, see Tomkins, *Bride and the Bachelors*; this appraisal is now put into its proper historical context, see Moffitt, *Alchemist of the Avant-Garde*, esp. ch. 7. There are only a few other art-historical discussions of this crucial modernist topic; see, for instance, Arnheim, "Accident and the Necessity of Art"; Bogel, *Chance and Change*; Calvesi, "Il caso nell'arte contemporanea"; Hancock, "Arp's Chance Collages"; Lachman, "'The Image Made by Chance' in China and the West"; Mann, "Symmetry, Chance, Biomorphism." Scholarly research into the strictly literary appropriations of "l'écriture automatique" seems more developed at this writing; see Abtado, "Écriture automatique et instance du sujet"; Berman, "Strindberg, Painter, Critic, Modernist"; Durand, "'Mot par mot': Poétique et poésie du hasard chez Mallarmé"; Harper, "'Unbelievers in the House': Yeats's Automatic Script"; Harper, "The Medium as Creator, George Yeats's Role in the Automatic Script"; Humphries, *Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel*; Orr, "Random Verbal Generators"; Powris, "Automatic Writing"; Sarrat, "La imaginación automática"; Schevill, "The Chances of Poetry"; Sprayberry, "Critical Edition of Yeats Automatic Script"; Vree, "Orakeltaal: De Surrealisten en het Automatisch Schrift"; Wordsworth, "Chance in Other Words." For the essential background material, the impact of the modern "science" of psychology, see Ellenberger, *Discovery of the Unconscious*; Whyte, *Unconscious Before Freud*.

The experience of poetic inspiration [which may now be extended to include “artistic” inspiration as well] is said to differ from normal ideation in possessing some or all of these four characteristics: (a) The composition is sudden, effortless, and unanticipated. The poem or passage [or visual image] springs to completion all at once, without the prior intention of the poet [or painter], and without that process of considering, rejecting, and selecting alternatives which ordinarily intervene between the intention and the achievement. (b) The composition is involuntary and [*nota bene*] *automatic*; it comes and goes at its own pleasure, independently of the will of the poet [or painter]. (c) In the course of composition, the poet [or painter] feels intense excitement, usually described as a state of elation and rapture, but occasionally [the creative experience is] said to be racking and painful in its initial stages, though followed by a sense of blissful relief and quiescence. (d) The completed work is as unfamiliar and surprising to the poet [or painter] as though it had been written [or painted] by someone else.¹¹

We have, moreover, just seen that, after 1876, in fashioning something like a universally influential definition of the convulsive inner sources of modern artistic *Inspiration*, Friedrich Nietzsche had said very much the same thing about *Dionysus*. Following Nietzsche, the Symbolists, who more particularly stressed esoteric “initiation,” said much the same thing, as did the Surrealists. Although not commonly recognized as such, another Surrealist-Dionysiac contribution to post-modernist vanguard expression was so-called “performance art.”

Antonin Artaud and the Surrealist-Dionysiac “Theatre of Cruelty”

In the case of a specific, now considered very influential, performance-artist, Antonin Artaud (1896–1948), we have perhaps the greatest extant body of theoretical writings defining the parameters of this once revolutionary kind of post-theatrical art.¹² (fig. 21) Once presenting a truly revolutionary experience, performance art is now rather conventionalized: it is, for example, now routinely taught in provincial state universities in America. Long before that, however, there was Artaud, another mad visionary artist who felt himself

¹¹ Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, 189; emphasis mine on “automatic.”

¹² See Artaud, *Oeuvres complètes* (7 vols.). For some interesting observations about Artaud’s career overall, see González Alcantud, *El exotismo en las vanguardias artístico-literarias*, 272–74, 280–84.

“liberated” by Dionysian precedent. In the broader, professional understanding, this perception makes perfect sense. It is a commonplace among students of the history of literature that “theater” itself was wholly a Dionysian invention: “Tragedy had originated in Dionysian ritual dithyrambics; comedy had originated with the leaders of phallic songs in the *kómoi* or village Dionysiac revels.”¹³ As summed up by one of Artaud’s biographers, the significant traits of what he called his “Theater of Cruelty”—traits which will also be seen to apply to much of post-WW II performance art, Beuys’s included (**figs. 24, 25**)—embrace the following doctrinal issues:

1. Rejection of the traditional “literary theater,” which was seen pejoratively to be (merely) sequentially “narrative” in the broadest sense, meaning also didactic and psychologically narrowed.
2. A reiterated “metaphysical” conception of theatrical performance as representing a “magical” microcosm within a Cosmic Whole.
3. Regressive recreation of a primitive Theater of Myth, also called “metaphysical,” such as that kind (supposedly) known to the ancients and eastern cultures.
4. A relentlessly aggressive overall strategy: to stir repeatedly the spectator by *shock*, by eliciting sharp visceral, even threatening effects.
5. Performance is now consciously shaped to embrace a cathartic, *healing* end: we are specifically told that the desired purpose is psychic “therapy.”
6. Emphasis is now placed upon a participatory role to be played by the audience, particularly as (sometimes involuntary) components to the psychic “dynamicism” of the contrived spectacle.
7. Pre-eminence is now (in a conventionally post-Freudian age) accorded to the function of the unconsciousness, particularly as an essential function in recreating a largely amorphous “dream-world.”
8. Reliance on figures of the collective unconsciousness typically leads to a reduction of the stage-characters to quasi-allegorical “archetypes.”
9. Each performance should be wrought anew, so that each event represents a “fresh experience,” as much for the performers as for the spectators.
10. Invention of novel theatrical spatial languages, giving new autonomous emphasis to gesture, movements, costume, lighting, etc.
11. Reliance upon minute non-narrative corporeal effects, such as breathing techniques, as methods leading to sub-verbal portrayal and enhancing psychic empathy.¹⁴

¹³ Wimsatt, *Literary Criticism*, 47.

¹⁴ Knapp, *Antonin Artaud*, 222 (I have changed the order of Knapp’s summary, going instead from broad “strategies” to specific “tactics”).

In the light of what immediately follows, it is also instructive to note that one of Artaud's last (and typically abortive) theatrical projects was to be a revival of Euripides's Dionysiac celebration of *Les Bacchantes*.

With these definitions in hand, which are admittedly as vague and/or elastic as is postmodernist performance-art itself, we may now endeavor to see just how far back in history we can actually trace its origins. According to the accepted recipe, it all began in ancient Greece, in Dionysiac rites celebrating a mythologized god of intoxication, *Bacchus*. Likely, there were even earlier precedents, particularly in pre-historical, literally "primitive," European fertility rites—but, alas, all written record is lost of these. Ancient worship of Dionysos-Bacchus was incredibly diverse in its ecstatic manifestations.¹⁵ We do, however, know that his followers roamed the wild places, forests and mountains, clothing themselves in fawn skins and wielding wands topped with ivy (*thyrsoi*). Initiates were said to tear animals to pieces (*sparagmos*), then to eat the flesh raw (*omophagia*) as a way of assimilating the Dionysian power embodied within the dead animal; perhaps even dead hares were included in the ancient ritual menu. These unscripted orgiastic "events," the "Mysteries," were cooked in ecstasy, inebriation, in sexuality and spiritual bliss.

The Dionysiac Mysteries eventually gave birth to actors, appearing in official festivals, who wore their masks in public performances. Among a few Dionysiac texts surviving from this era, especially vivid is the portrayal recorded in Euripides's *Bacchae* (ca. 420 BCE). This playwright breathlessly described the "whirling dances" of the Maenads (**fig. 4**), set "to the strict beat of the taut hide and the squeal of the wailing flute." These were possessed but "purified" women, "who ran barefoot and crazy." Those were women whom Dionysus had "stung with frenzy, hounded from home up to the mountains where they wander, crazed of mind and compelled to wear my orgies' livery." Rather like the case of the example of postmodernist performances in Austria I shall cite, then "you could have seen a single woman with bare hands tear a fat calf in two, still bellowing with fright, while others clawed the heifers to pieces. There were ribs and cloven hooves scattered everywhere, and scraps smeared with blood hung from the fir-trees." In short, the typical participant

¹⁵ For what we do know about this, see Dodds, *Greeks and the Irrational*; Kerényi, *Dionysos*; Nilsson, *Dionysiac Mysteries*.

was envisioned as “foaming at the mouth, and her crazed eyes were rolling with frenzy: *she was mad, stark mad, possessed by Bacchus.*”¹⁶

Especially instrumental in reshaping the post-World War I aesthetics—and ethics—attributed to performance-art was Antonin Artaud, whose doctrines we have just briefly summarized. He, like Joseph Beuys, is a figure emblematic of his times, a character whom the cultural historian would have to have invented were he not already brought into existence by the collusion of his perhaps unwitting, biological parents. Artaud, who had, like Beuys, an dramatically arresting “expressionistic” visage—high cheekbones, thin lips, a broad forehead, sunken and weirdly incandescent eyes (**fig. 21**)—was born in September 1896 in Marseilles. His father, dour owner of a profitable ship-fitting business, was of Provençal stock—and singularly uninterested in the arts; his volatile mother, who thoroughly dominated Antonin’s fragile emotional life, was of Greek origin. At the age of five, Artaud was struck down by meningitis; attacking his brain, it left him for the rest of his miserable life with nearly unbearable migraines, at which times he would drift into delusionary, even psychotic states. These recurrent attacks were to lead to his frequent incarceration in various mental hospitals. During his consistently troubled lifetime, he was nearly always without money, often without even lodging, and his radical ideas about a revolutionary new kind of theater were hugely ignored by his contemporaries. An incorrigible drug-addict since 1915, Artaud died at the age of 51, in March 1948, in an asylum at Ivry, impoverished, emaciated, and wracked with psychic and physical pains.

Like the posthumously popularized (since 1963), bell-jarred paperback-poetess Sylvia Plath (1932–63),¹⁷ Artaud is an apocryphal, self-made, appealingly pathetic figure. More significantly, such pathetic types operate something like role-models for post-modernist vanguard aspirants. Such self-immolating types, like Van Gogh before them (**fig. 12**), symbolize, to the popular mind at least, the inherently tragic, and here wholly self-destructive, life belonging to over-intense,

¹⁶ Euripides, as quoted in Meyer, *Ancient Mysteries*, 67–81.

¹⁷ For a cogent analysis of Plath’s pop mythology as a stereotypical topos where, since Freud’s self-psychoanalysis, “therapy and art coalesced,” see Porter, *Social History of Madness*, ch. 11, “The Therapeutic God”; for a close examination of how and why Plath is a *flawed* poet, in both the psychological and the aesthetic sense, see Rothenberg, *Creativity and Madness*, 70 ff.

modernist creative endeavor. In short, they exemplify the archetypal Dionysian myth of artistic self-destructiveness. In all three cases (and more could be cited), if it were soap-opera, we wouldn't believe it—but it really happened. By a New Age author, Michael Tucker, recently Sylvia Plath has been generously called a figure endowed with “the poet's psychic gifts that gained her access to depths formerly reserved to the primitive ecstatic priests, shamans and holy men.” Likewise, for shaman-seeker Tucker the mythically tortured Artaud becomes emblematic of newly desirable qualities to be assigned to the artistic “shaman, a prophet, an alchemist, an oracle, a saint, a gnostic teacher, or indeed the founder of a new religion.”¹⁸

It was, however, only posthumously, and particularly as due to the tardy publication of his multi-volume *Oeuvres complètes* (1956–67), that the tortured Artaud finally began to exercise the immense, near-mythic influence he today enjoys among the shamanoid *cognoscenti*, including Mr. Tucker. Like Beuys, Artaud was unquestionably inspired by Occultism. Like Beuys, he was both a visionary and a mystic.¹⁹ Accordingly, Artaud saw, as had the ancient participants in Dionysiac theater, “performance” as a convulsive *ritual* inspiring numinous or religious experiences within the spectator. Like Beuys, Artaud advocated an anti-classical theatrical experience which worked directly, immediately upon the nerves and senses. For this revelation, Artaud was much indebted to contemporary, and local, Surrealist celebrations of the dream, of chance operations and automatism. Like Beuys, Artaud created a theater based on myths, symbols, and gestures, all conceived of as weapons to whip up irrational psychic forces. One did so in order that a collectively perceived art-event could be transformed into a personal, “living” experience, “a kind of event,” as he put it.

In essays written between 1931 and 1935, Artaud formulated his concept of a “Theater of Cruelty,” which obviously is fundamentally just another expression of the early German Romantics' notions of *Entfremdung* (alienation). Including in his recipe a large dollop of Futurist provocation and Surrealist *rêveries*, Artaud explained, according to the “purgative” alchemical terminology that so fascinated him (as in his *La pierre philosophale*, 1931), that:

¹⁸ Tucker, *Dreaming with Open Eyes*, 191 (Artaud), 196 (Plath).

¹⁹ For the proof of Beuys' active involvement with esoterica, see Moffitt, *Occultism in Avant-Garde Art*, esp. 105 ff.

Everything that acts is a cruelty [*cruauté*]. It is upon this idea of extreme action, pushed beyond all limits, that the theater must be rebuilt. It will be imbued with the idea that the public thinks first of all with its senses, and that it is absurd to address oneself first to its [rational] understanding, as does the ordinary psychological theater. The Theater of Cruelty [conversely] proposes to resort to a mass spectacle; to seek in the agitation of tremendous masses, convulsed and hurled against each other, a little of that poetry of [Renaissance] festivals and crowds when, all too rarely nowadays, the people pour out into the streets. . . .

In the same way that our dreams have an effect upon us, and that reality has an effect upon our dreams, so we believe that the images of thought can be identified with a dream, that which will be efficacious to the degree that it can be projected with the necessary violence [in order to] allow the public to liberate within itself the magical liberties of dreams which it can [only] recognize when they are imprinted with terror and cruelty.

I employ the word “*cruauté*” in the sense of an appetite for life, a cosmic rigor, an implacable necessity, in the gnostic [mystic] sense of a living whirlwind that devours the darkness, in the sense of that pain apart from whose ineluctable necessity life could not continue; good is desired, it is the consequence of an act; evil is permanent. . . . It is cruelty that cements matter together [like alchemy]; cruelty is that which molds the features of the created world. Good is always upon the outer face, but the face within is evil. Evil will eventually be reduced, but [only] at the supreme instant when everything that was form will be on the point of returning to chaos.²⁰

Obviously, the major purpose espoused by Artaud was a militant and wholly emotional, pure *irrationality*, an attempt to divest the traditional theater of all linear logic and materialist verisimilitude. This is nothing new: it was all to be found in the *Bacchae* by Euripides, a Dionysiac play which Artaud had wished to recreate as a venerable exemplar of his own cathartic and “therapeutic” ideas. Besides emphasizing the function of his kind of theater “as a true operation in magic,” Artaud also stressed a new importance accorded to the audience as an artistic “accomplice” in a mutually shared “ordeal”; as such, the procedure was actually really ancient, unquestionably “Bacchic.” All this was explained by Artaud:

The spectator who comes to us knows that he has agreed to undergo a true operation [*opération*, like the German *Aktion*], where not only his mind, but even his senses and his flesh are going to come into play.

²⁰ Artaud, *Theater and its Double*, 85, 102, 104.

Henceforth, he will go to the theater as he goes to the dentist, in the same spirit and with the thought that he will not die from the ordeal but that it is something serious, one from which he will not emerge intact. If we were not convinced of being able to strike at him in the most serious manner possible, we would consider ourselves incapable of carrying out our most absolute task.

He must really be convinced that we are capable of making him scream out. . . . We conceive of the theater as a true operation in magic. The *mise-en-scène* in itself, the actors' evolution, must be considered on as visible signs of an invisible or secret language. We do not speak to the eyes, nor to the direct emotions of the soul; what we are trying to create is a certain psychological emotion where the most secret mainsprings of our hearts will be laid bare.²¹

Besides acknowledging that his notion of *théâtre* "is a true operation in magic," the root-canal analogy seems an interesting way to describe the predictable audience-culture experience in assisting at a typical session of postmodernist performance art. Be that as it may, as was put otherwise by his American biographer, Bettina Knapp,

Since Artaud's ideas concerning the dramatic arts were born from his [mental] illness, he looked upon the theater as a curative agent; a means whereby the individual could come to the theater to be dissected, split and cut open first, and then healed. The healing ritual would proceed as follows: the stage happening would elicit psychological projections from the spectator. As tension was developed on stage, as events moved toward a climax, there would ensue a corresponding tension in the audience that would eventually become so great as to force the spectator to recognize the nature of his projections and anxieties.

Once having permitted his anxieties to come to the light of his consciousness, the spectator would now see his various problems from a different point of view and would gain, thereby, greater perception and self-understanding. This new vision would allow the fragments of the spectator's personality, which had been projected onto the stage, to return to their source, the spectator's being, nourished and renewed by the added understanding. . . . The piece would have to cause traumas in the spectator's psyche: create guilt, horror, and fright [with] works possessing "purgative" powers: they instilled fear and chilled audiences with terror and fervor.²²

²¹ Artaud, *Oeuvres complètes*, II: 14, 23.

²² Knapp, *Artaud*, 60–61.

Again, we are already made familiar with most of this; among others, Aristotle had discussed it much earlier, in his *De poetica*. Rather than *modernisme*, automatically making it “new,” it’s really about *katharsis*, making it old stuff indeed: *Dionysus redivivus*.

A Dionysian Niche for Hermann Nitsch and Chris Burden

I must mention another innovative performance artist, an Austrian, and the example by him which I have chosen even includes—literally!—the *sparagmos* and *omophagia* of ancient Dionysiac ritual. A rather gruesome kind of action became associated with the “Orgies-Mysteries Theatre” in Austria; as was grimly proposed by its leader, Hermann Nitsch,

On 4 June 1962, I shall disembowel, tear and pull to pieces a dead lamb. This is a manifest action—an “aesthetic” substitute for a sacrificial act—the sense and necessity of which will become clear after a study of the theory of the OM Theatre project. Through my artistic production (a form of the mysticism of being), I take upon myself the apparent negative—unsavory, perverse, obscene, the passion and the hysteria of the act of sacrifice—so that YOU are spared the sully, the shaming descent into the extreme. I am the expression of all creation. I have merged into it and have identified myself with it. All torment and lust, combined in a single state of unburdened intoxication, will pervade me and, therefore, YOU. The play-acting will be a means of gaining access to the most “profound” and “holy” symbols, through blasphemy and desecration. This is a blasphemous, anthropologically determined view of existence, in which grail and phallus appear as two mutually necessary extremes.²³

Indeed, there can be no doubt that here we have a clearcut diagnosis of *Bacchus redivivus*. Nitsch himself listed a number of symbolic associations for his gory accessories, all of which partake of recollections of the ancient Dionysiac *mysteria*: “slaughter house, sacred killing, slaughter, animal sacrifice, human sacrifice, primitive sacrifice.” Among desirable sensual impressions he mentions: “blood-warm, blood-soaked, malleable, resilient, stuffed to bursting, to puncture, to crush, a stream of excrement, the intensive odor of raw meat and excrement.” Just as Berchorius would have done centuries earlier for

²³ Nitsch, in Henri, *Total Art*, p. 168; see also the 1970 exhibition catalogue, *Wien: Bildkompendium Wiener Aktionismus*.

his *moralizater* allegorization of “Bacchus as Christ,” to the element of “blood” Nitsch assigns symbolic associations of “red wine, Eucharist, the blood of Christ, sacrifice, human sacrifice, animal sacrifice, slaughter, primitive sacrifice, sacred killing, life juices.” Just as Berchorius did, Nitsch makes the essential reference to Bacchus, even using the proper Greek name of the wine god (albeit in a lower-case); according to one of his typically gory performance scripts:

Take, eat, this is my body, broken for you for the remission of sins . . . the crucifixion of Jesus Christ . . . the tearing apart of Dionysus . . . the killing of Orpheus . . . ritual regicide . . . killing and consuming the totemic beast . . . consuming food: meat and wine in sumptuous measure.²⁴

One other American out-performer of the typically pain-wracked, post-Artaud, neo-Dionysian persuasion should be mentioned, Chris Burden (b. 1946), especially as his works often approach the Germanic *Expressionismus* of Joseph Beuys. Or maybe he just *seems* to: certainly his iconography is at times generically Teutonic, even including a Bundesrepublik automobile. As we shall see, on more than one occasion Burden has risked his life for art—but art seems never to have reciprocated the favor. Admittedly, the circumstances were controlled, but that does not greatly mitigate the sense of danger. On his body Burden still bears physical scars, literal stigmata as it were, marking his more than merely aesthetic commitment to his “art.”²⁵

On April 23, 1974, in a piece eponymously titled *Transfixed*, he was crucified—literally, with iron nails even—to the back of a Volkswagen Beetle. The obligatory photographic records show the pained youth pinned to the spreading bonnet, and Burden’s palms still exhibit the stigmata of his self-inflicted ordeal, what might be jocularly called “Burden’s Burden.” Regarding another performance, *Five Day Locker Piece*, held from April 26 to April 30, 1971, at the University of California at Irvine, he blandly explained that

I was locked in locker number 5 for five consecutive days and did not leave the locker during this time. The locker measured two feet high, two feet wide, and three feet deep. I stopped eating several days prior to entry. The locker directly above me contained five gallons of bottled

²⁴ Nitsch, *Orgien-Mysterien-Theater*, 67–104 (including the author’s use of the lower-case for the proper names).

²⁵ The following account is mostly drawn from Gardner, *Culture or Trash?*, 3–8; if the reader really wants to know more about Burden, look him up in the *Art Index* (with many, many citations: one wonders why . . .).

water; the locker below me contained an empty five-gallon bottle [into which to urinate].

Equally notable was *Kunst Kick*, performed on June 19, 1974, and thus simply explained:

At the public opening of the Art Fair in Basel, Switzerland, at twelve noon, I lay down at the top of two flights of concrete stairs in the Mustermesse. Charles Hill repeatedly kicked my body down the stairs, two or three steps at a time.

At 6 p.m. on November 15, 1973, Burden made his own figurative *Doorway to Heaven*: "I stood in the doorway of my studio [in Venice, California] facing the boardwalk. A few spectators watched as I pushed two live electric wires into my chest. The wires crossed and exploded, burning me, but saving me from electrocution." So spared, on May 7, 1974 Burden moved on to create his martyred *Velvet Water*: "I repeatedly submerged my face in the sink and attempted to breathe water. After about five minutes, I collapsed, choking." But the most (in)famous of all Burden's performances has got to be *Shoot*, held at the "F Space" in Santa Ana (California), on November 19, 1971. "At 7: 45 P.M. I was shot in the left arm by a friend. The bullet was a copper-jacket, 22 long-rifle. My friend[?] was standing about fifteen feet from me." The flattened bullet survives as a Beuys-like relic.

Need it be said (again) that there are some obvious parallels between Burden's grisly routines and the attention-getting ordeals performed long ago by "enthusiastic" martyrs of the early Christian church? Both types often performed in a theatrical setting, as witnessed by an aghast crowd: paleo-Christians did their act in the Colosseum; Burden did his in a gallery with folding chairs for his testators. Both martyred sorts exhibit(ed) the same delight in going to extremes, in testing the limits of human endurance. Over-burdened by Burden, historically informed art critic James Gardner finds that he:

thinks of Saint Simeon Stylites standing atop a pillar in Syria for sixty-eight years, descending only twice to move to a taller pillar. As with Saint Simeon, the educational and spiritual point of Burden's performances consists in their [putative] appeal to our imaginations. For a thousand years the mind of Europe was fascinated by what it must have felt like to be Saint Sebastian riddled with arrows, or Saint Catherine stretched upon her wheel, or Saint Steven stoned to death,

or Saint Lawrence lying stoically on the fiery grill. For [some of] us there is a similar fascination in the idea, more than in the visible act, of Chris Burden inhaling water or being kicked down a flight of stairs or being shot at from fifteen feet away.

Both the acts of the martyrs and the performances of Chris Burden have an abrupt, epigrammatic brevity. They are cosmic one-liners. At the same time, Burden has isolated himself from the rest of society. His theatrical self-denial, his flamboyant rejection of normal human behavior—by lying in bed without speaking for three weeks, by stuffing himself into a luggage locker for five days—represents an aggression against society that is less protracted, perhaps, but scarcely less arduous than the hermitage of Saint Anthony or the Carthusian monks.

But in the name of what god, in the service of what religion are these ostensibly religious acts performed? In the absence of any direct spiritual reference, Burden is left with no center of homing [that is] other than Art itself, that abstract, gaseous entity rising out of the mass of artifacts created, and acts committed, in its name. This idea of art must never be confused, however, with “art for art’s sake.” What that vague and superannuated phrase really meant was “art for beauty’s sake.” Beauty was the end of aestheticism and art was the means. Most people, when they say they “like art,” really mean that they like beauty through art, or truth through art. Only a phony or a fool would admire a Cézanne landscape because it was art. Surely the fact of its being great, dramatic, authoritative art is what commands our attention. In contrast, Burden’s [creative corpus] has been stripped of any value or interest beyond the bald, naked fact of its identity as an art object. It is a kind of martyrial affirmation of the idea, the word *art*.²⁶

*Dionysus and the Formalist “Gesture”:
The Energetic Example of Jackson Pollock*

An article published by Charles Lachman, a scholar of Oriental art, has recently re-awakened the largely dormant art-historical issue of “The Image Made by Chance.”²⁷ While making no pretension whatsoever to examine exhaustively the sources of strictly *Occidental* aleatory artistic practises—even though he does cite Pollock’s *Autumn Rhythm* (1950) as an apposite image (**fig. 22**), Lachman usefully quotes from a variety of historical texts showing the ubiquity of such “chance,”

²⁶ Gardner, *ibid.*, 7.

²⁷ Lachman, “‘The Image Made by Chance’ in China and the West.”

or psychic-automatist, techniques in ancient China.²⁸ There, just as in the modernist West, one finds plentiful written evidence for, as Lachman puts it, “the invocation of randomness as a generative principle [expressed in] unconscious or mindless states . . . linking forgetfulness, chance, and artistic inspiration.” More specifically, he notes that “there is an implicit parallel between the emphasis on ‘mindless’ unself-conscious creation and the workings of the *Tao* (‘the Way’ or ‘cosmic principle’).” In this case, the given, quasi-philosophical assumption is that “the ‘image made by chance’ is not really made [in China] by chance at all, but is instead a tangible marker of the artist’s achievement of a profound harmony with the cosmos.” As he does not mention, however, “‘mindless’ unself-conscious creation” was also popularized in the neo-Dionysian scriptures of Friedrich Nietzsche.

One has no problem in accepting Lachman’s conclusions (also including his metaphysical propositions) concerning the significance of the Chance Gesture in the generation of those distinctively “calligraphic” traits characterizing traditional Chinese landscape paintings. I would, however, like to question briefly the matter of just how so many *Occidental* avant-garde painters might have become privy to such uniquely *Oriental* ideas. Curiously, Lachman does not cite a widely-read book that appeared in the very year, 1957, that witnessed the aleatory execution of Pollock’s celebrated painting “made by Chance” and later called *Autumn Rhythm* (fig. 22). This is a significant lacuna as this publication neatly verbalizes the essence of contemporary “Action Painting” as practised by Pollack and his painterly peers. The text in question is Alan Watts’ *The Way of Zen*, and even more to the point, the same text was reprinted just two years later as an inexpensive (then, in 1959, costing only fifty-cents) paperback. In this easily accessible form,²⁹ it was eagerly consumed

²⁸ Lachman, *ibid.*, cites only briefly (in his note 47) a published monograph (originally a 1983 dissertation from the Courtauld Institute) directly dealing in useful detail with many of the issues he raises: Clarke, *Influence of Oriental Thought*.

²⁹ My personal experience (which I do not present as “scientific” evidence) is that, these days, visual artists (some of whom are my best friends) buy/own paperbacks, not hardback books; so doing, they generally reveal themselves members of a pre-digested, “popular” or mass-produced (à la WalMart), culture. In an analogous context, that is, regarding the assimilation of esoteric themes by avant-garde artists, I have repeatedly stressed the central importance of this universal “paperback culture” for the mass consumption of pseudo-philosophical ideas and motifs by innumerable practitioners of the avant-garde; see Moffitt, *Occultism in Avant-Garde Art*.

by nearly every painter I knew as an undergraduate art major in the Bay Area—none of whom, however, could read either Chinese or Japanese. This is scarcely surprising: Alan Watts was (in spite of affectations to the contrary) unquestionably an “Occidental” in his way of interpreting Orientalia.

As interpreted by Watts, in “Zen-type” painting, “the very technique involves the art of artlessness, or what Sabro Hasegawa has called the ‘controlled accident’,” and, hence, “artistic technique is discipline in spontaneity and spontaneity in discipline.” Any artist who subscribes to such techniques, says Watts (a former Episcopalian, or Church of England, minister), tacitly reveals “a means of *initiation* into a spiritual tradition.” You could call that tradition “*Zen*” (as does Watts) or you can call it “*Dionysian*.” For Watts, however, the quintessential expression of this exotic “spiritual tradition” was “a calligraphic style of painting, done with black ink on paper or silk,” and “its control requires a free movement of the hand and arm, as if one were dancing [i.e., like Pollock: see **fig. 23**] rather than writing on paper. In short, it is a perfect instrument for the expression of unhesitating spontaneity.” As defined by Watts, the formal characteristics of the “free movement,” calligraphic procedure include “the absence of symmetry,” “consistent avoidance of regular and geometrical shapes,” and “the characteristic brush line is jagged, gnarled, irregularly twisting, dashing or sweeping—always spontaneous rather than predictable.” As such, spontaneous calligraphy becomes essentially “vitalistic” in character. Moreover, according to Watts, the haptic style is indeed charged with emblematic significance: “It shows us the life of nature,” and “all those ‘controlled accidents’ of the brush . . . exemplify the marvelous meaninglessness of nature itself.”³⁰

The fact that such effects were, in 1957, a nearly universal characteristic of self-identified “avant-garde” painting during the Cold War, as much in Europe as in the Americas, need not be so noted

³⁰ Watts, *The Way of Zen*, 169–76, “Zen in the Arts.” Whereas I naturally doubt that Watts’ popular book had any tangible effect on Pollock in 1957, the notoriously balletic painter just might have previously read some of the books (in English) cited in Watts’ bibliography: p. 197 ff. I may also briefly mention that in art school (in my case, the California College of Art and Crafts, ca. 1959–62) we were often treated to pertinent demonstrations—“pour encourager les autres”—of Sumi-brush calligraphy, executed by genuine Oriental *virtuosi*.

by Mr. Watts, for he was into Zen, not *Kunstwissenschaft*. Nonetheless, an art historian must point out the meta-artistic fact that such “inspired” automatist art was implicitly championed by various Cold Warriors as a positive emblem of that bounteous “freedom,” creative as well as political, then taken uniquely to characterize the “Free World.”³¹ As for the Abstract Expressionists themselves (versus many of their more verbal champions writing much later), they apparently remained essentially a-political. Nonetheless, they were certainly affected by World War II, a universal catastrophe impelling their underlying, but typically inchoate, impulses towards what one art historian calls metaphorical “themes including fecundity, subterranean forces, subconscious vitality, vitalism, the space-and-time continuum, mythic natural energy, magic power, and many more.”³²

Whatever its unspoken political contexts, the quintessential stylistic manifestation of aleatory automatism—as practised by all the *non-Oriental* painters known to me—does turn out to be nearly inevitably “swirly” in appearance. This must be so, especially given that the basic Occidental, avant-garde operating procedures are likewise characterized by what Watts called “the absence of symmetry,” “a consistent avoidance of regular and geometrical shapes,” and brush-work which is “jagged, gnarled, irregularly twisting, dashing or sweeping—always spontaneous rather than predictable.” Given over to “Gesture” (*nomen est omen*), the immediate physical results typically are “sweeping,” or rhythmically curvilinear, “expressive” forms.

As it is currently defined (and with specific reference here to the *Oxford English Dictionary*), we find that the operative term—“GESTURE”—represents: “The employment of bodily movements, attitudes, expression [:] Movement of the body or limbs, as an expression of feeling.” Similarly *Webster’s Dictionary* defines *Gesture* as: “A motion of the body or limbs intended to express an idea or a passion, or to enforce or emphasize an argument, assertion, opinion; the use of motions of the limbs or body as a mode of direct expression.” From

³¹ For the *Realpolitik* background belonging to these kind of Cold War artistic, generally automatist and thus “free,” phenomena, see Cockcroft, “Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War”; Guilbaut, “The New Adventures of the Avant-Garde in America”; Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*.

³² Polcari, “II: Abstract Expressionism: ‘New and Improved’,” 177; for more on the concrete artistic effects of the 1939–45 conflict, see also his “Adolf Gottlieb’s Allegorical Epic.”

the larger, even “psychic,” perspective, the modernist “art gesture of direct expression” properly belongs to what E. H. Gombrich labels an ubiquitous art-historical “pathetic fallacy,” namely the “expressionist assumption that [artistic] forms are analogues of feelings and will [or ‘*Kunstwollen*’], therefore, convey a specific emotional experience.”³³ As we now recognize (see Chapter 1), these are the typical modernist signs of “self-expression,” an “inspirational” doctrine which was initially championed by French Symbolist artists, and they did so perhaps two decades before the Germans began to produce their own praiseworthy, often wholly non-representational, *Ausdrucksformen*.

An often applied designation for this now-canonic kind of automatist-gestural expressionism, “intended to express an idea or a passion,” accordingly is what has been called “Calligraphic Painterly Abstraction.” From what Alan Watts said, we might even think to ascribe the entrance of this term, and its subsequent pictorial exemplars, as having been due to the spreading influence of Zen after 1957—but only in the way that doctrine was explained by *Occidental* enthusiasts. In any event, Pollock reached his similar looking pictorial expressiveness by other means, pure “psychic automatism,” and he had done so long before 1957.

In effect, such “Occidentalized Zen” wisdom is only one, late blooming fruit opportunely plucked from a great Tree of Esoteric Knowledge, and one of its most pungent fruits produced the intoxicating wine of Dionysus—but long, long beforehand. Whatever may prove to be the real cultural precedents, or actual point of derivation for this splashy outburst of twentieth-century Calligraphic Painterly Abstraction—certainly coming historically in large part from the Dionysiac celebrations of Friedrich Nietzsche, then directly to the Surrealists, then sideways to Occidentalized Zen—unquestionably the corporeally “expressive” painterly mode has long since become a traditional stylistic staple of art-school curriculums on both sides of the Atlantic.

As standard curricular material, it now has become “Orthodox Modernism.” A century or more ago, pictorial *orthodoxy* (from the Greek: *orthós* + *dóxa* = right opinion) was represented by the likes of

³³ Gombrich, *Meditations*, 57. For a case-study of some very specific procedures devised to convey series of very specific emotional experiences, see Moffitt, “Fighting Forms”; “Theosophical Origins of Marc’s Color Theory.”

Adolphe William Bouguereau and Sir Edwin Landseer. Quite to the contrary of their now wholly discredited “academic” procedures and narrational fixations is the current orthodoxy of the autonomously expressive gesture, with this emblematically representing creative “liberation” achieved mostly through psychic automatism. Thus the self-expressive *beaux-gestes* concurrently suggest what may be thought of as an “Iconography of the Primordial.” This *Urbild* iconography is characterized by all those magical-gestural, vitalist-drippy, often earthen-colored, brush-marks laid vigorously upon stretched canvas in a usually “spontaneous,” or essentially haphazard, fashion. That egregiously “inspired” manner of automatist-marking naturally (automatically) produces “calligraphic” patterns. Such effects are nearly inevitable since these are the natural products of “the use of motions of the limbs or body as a mode of direct expression.” Centuries ago, Bacchantes and Maenads similarly practised such *ecstatic* expressivity.

It was, of course, Jackson Pollock who initially thrust the technique of painterly “unconsciousness”—meaning Automatism—directly into the *popular*, or mass-media, consciousness.³⁴ As early as 1943, when he still remained unknown to the general public (or *hoi polloi*), Pollock grandly announced in an interview that “I am particularly impressed with the concept of the source of art being the unconscious announced by European Moderns [evidently Surrealists]. This idea [of unconscious creation] interests me more than the specific [European] painters do.” In 1950, he stated that “each age finds its own [artistic] technique,” and presently “the unconscious is a very important side of modern art, and I think the unconscious drives do mean a lot [particularly] in expressing an inner world, in other words, expressing the energy, the motion and the inner forces.” As for his odd techniques, “I do step into the canvas occasionally, that is, working from the four sides, [but] I don’t have to get into the canvas too much. . . . I paint on the floor, and this isn’t unusual: the Orientals did that.” As for the expressive results, “they’re all

³⁴ For a cautious (so commendable), up-to-date and scholarly, appraisal of the painter’s sources and unquestionable cultural impact, see Cernuschi, *Jackson Pollock*; for his “automatism,” mostly acquired via Surrealism, see esp. 44–46, 72, 107, 126, 129; and, more specifically, see Rubin, “A Case for Content: Jackson Pollock’s Subject Was the Automatic Gesture.” One Surrealist painter admired by Pollock was André Masson; for Masson’s automatic drawings (begun in 1923 or 1924), see Gibson, “Surrealism Before Freud” (a resumé of the author’s Ph.D. 1985 dissertation, “Surrealism’s Early Maps of the Unconsciousness”).

direct painting . . . it's direct; I don't work from drawings, I don't make sketches."³⁵

As depicted in 1950 by Hans Namuth in a famous series of often reprinted action-photographs, the self-possessed and inspired Pollock is shown performing different stages belonging to a new, maenad-like choreography now characterizing "Action Painting," so apparently recreating the frenzied rhythms belonging to what seems an ancient Dionysiac dance. (fig. 23) Once Pollock's expressive, "direct" mode of painterly "unconsciousness" was eventually thrust into the popular, or mass-media, consciousness—with this facetiously dubbing him "Jack the Dripper"—it was then literally made "popular." This significant cultural event can be precisely dated.

A dramatically illustrated article, depicting the painter's equally frenzied and painterly dances around his flattened canvas, appeared in the August 8, 1949, issue of *Life Magazine* (see fig. 23, a photograph which, although a bit later in date, reiterated the same painterly iconography of Bacchic gesture initially pictured in *Life*). In such a venue, this mass-media publication instantly made Pollock a celebrity, as it were a "media star," and on a level achieved by virtually no other artist of his (or any other) generation. As finally described here by a journalist for a mass-audience (presumably of mostly Philistine persuasions), Pollock dramatically becomes "the brooding, puzzled-looking man" designated "as a fine candidate to become the greatest American painter of the twentieth century." Even though the culturally clueless might choose to "condemn his pictures as degenerate and find them as unpalatable as yesterday's macaroni," even so, states the unnamed staff-writer, "Pollock, at the age of 37, has burst forth as the shining new phenomenon of American art" during the Cold War period.

Having announced Pollock's new role as an implicit cultural icon of energetic expressiveness and the kind of creative freedom supposedly unique to the "Free World," we now read the pertinent details of his dance-like creative process (fig. 23). In actual practice, this involves much "brooding and doodling," some thoroughly random "scrambling around," occasional painterly "attacks," and, most importantly, a complete unawareness "of what I'm doing" because

³⁵ Pollock interviews (1943 and 1950), as in Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory*, 575–77.

the painterly image has magically acquired “a life of its own.” As *Life* put it,

When Pollock decides to start a painting, the first thing he does is to take a large piece of canvas on the floor of his barn. “My painting does not come from the easel,” he explains, “I need the resistance of a hard surface.” Working on the floor gives him room to scramble around the canvas, attacking it from the top, the bottom or the side (if his pictures *can* be said to have a top, a bottom or a side) as the mood suits him. In this way, “I can literally be *in* the painting.” . . . Then, starting anywhere on the canvas, he goes to work. Sometimes he dribbles the paint on with a brush. Sometimes he scrawls it on with a stick, scrubs it with a trowel or even pours it on, straight out of the can.

In with it all, he deliberately mixes sand, broken glass, nails, screws, or other foreign matter lying around. Cigarette ashes and an occasional dead bee sometimes get in the picture inadvertently. “When I am *in* my painting,” says Pollock, “I’m not aware of what I’m doing.” To find out what he *has* been doing, he stops and contemplates the picture during what he calls his “get acquainted” period. . . . Pollock [explains that] the picture must retain “a life of its own.” Finally, after days of brooding and doodling, Pollock decides the painting is finished, a deduction few others are equipped to make.³⁶

Even though (and this is not at all surprising) the skeptical staff-writer for *Life Magazine* made no mention of the fact, this odd kind of creative product represented a conventional scenario, one which, with slight adjustments, one should have in fact already recognized, namely from having read Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* (first published in 1876). This is a seminal work which, according to recent scholarship, was indeed “read with great interest” by the group of “Action Painters” working around Pollock.³⁷

According to Nietzsche, writing in some four-score years earlier (when the automatist idea was still rather novel), there are certain commendable:

³⁶ “Life Magazine,” as in Hertz and Klein, *Twentieth-Century Art Theory*, 355–56; for more on the situation leading to this publication, and its immediate repercussions, see Collins, “*Life Magazine* and the Abstract Expressionists.” For the documentation supporting my passing reference to Pollock’s kind of painting having been made into an “icon of Free World expressiveness and creative freedom” during the Cold War, see again Cockcroft, “Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War”; Guilbaut, “The New Adventures of the Avant-Garde in America,” and, at much greater length, Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*.

³⁷ So noted in Cernuschi, *Pollock*, 131–32, also observing that, although there is no proof that Pollock himself had read the *The Birth of Tragedy*, he certainly must have known something of its familiar arguments; see also Rushing, “The Impact of Nietzsche.”

artistic energies which burst forth from nature herself, *without the mediation of the human artist*—energies in which nature’s art impulses are satisfied in the most immediate and direct way—first in the image world of dreams . . . and then as intoxicated reality, which . . . seeks to destroy the individual, redeeming him by a mystic feeling of Oneness. With reference to these immediate art-states of nature, every artist is an “imitator,” that is to say, either an Apollonian artist in dreams, or a Dionysiac artist in ecstasies. . . .

As a Dionysiac artist [see **fig. 22**], he . . . has already surrendered his subjectivity in the Dionysiac process [:] his passion dances before us in orgiastic frenzy [see **fig. 23**]. . . . Insofar as the subject is the artist himself, he has already been released from his individual will, and has become, as it were, the [essentially passive] medium through which the one truly existent subject celebrates his release in appearance. . . . He only knows something of the eternal essence of art only insofar as the genius coalesces with this primordial artist of the world in the act of artistic creation; for in this [transported] state he is, in a marvelous manner, at once subject and object, at once poet, actor, and spectator.³⁸

But Nietzsche had similarly conventional scenarios to draw upon, for instance, the truly ancient example of classical “*inspiration*,” a “gift” even known to have “seized” certain artists. One of those inspirational beneficiaries was Skopas, a sculptor in this instance (**fig. 4**). His frenzied creative act was observed long before by a Greek writer, Callistratus, who then (ca. 280 AD) had argued, like Nietzsche, that, “when they are seized by the gift of a more divine inspiration, artists give utterance to [artistic] creations that are [likewise] possessed and full of madness.” Due to “the inspiration [*enthousiasmon*] belonging to this work of art . . . the material, while retaining its own nature, yet seemed to depart from the law which governs [the medium].” Thus, “there was given [by the artist] so clear a perception of divine possession [*theiasmos*].” Just as seems the case with Pollock many centuries later, “fashioned by art in a manner not to be described, there shone so strikingly from it all the signs of passion which a soul goaded by madness displays . . . imprinting miracles upon inanimate matter.”³⁹ Again, we must tentatively underscore the considerable antiquity of the modernist Expressionists’ *Ausdrucksformen*.

³⁸ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 38, 48–52; the italics represent Nietzsche’s emphases.

³⁹ Callistratus: *Descriptions*, 380–85.

Our initial “stylistic,” and thus literally superficial, observation about the vanguard painter’s now conventionalized (post-Pollock) “use of motions of the limbs or body as a mode of direct expression” producing generally predictable pictorial effects, leads us directly to a larger, or internal and psychological, conclusion. The procedures generating that often brownish, nearly inevitably swirly and drippy, expressionistic-painterly “look” represent, in fact, a specific visual sign of the certain emblematic assumptions; these are what the late Jan Bialostocki might have called its “*Rahmenthemen*” (Framing-Themes).⁴⁰ In this case, the signs evidently point to an even broader, essentially esoteric, vision of “Nature” overall. In 1957, for instance, Alan Watts already explained that for some people, the Zen Look expressed “Life” itself, “the marvelous meaninglessness of nature itself.”

For Pollock and his painterly peers, as Jonathan Fineberg recently explains, more specifically, “automatism represented a device for objectifying an intense conscious experience as it was unfolding, rather than [as Breton conceived it] as a means of bringing forth unconscious material for association, or of using unconscious thought-processes to modify imagery. . . . The [American] artist ‘lived’ the painting entirely in the present, and the object was left over as an artifact of that event [representing] art itself [as revealed] in the *process* of painting.” Thus, wholly preoccupied with the “Process” of painting itself, the American Action Painters typically

conceived each work as an uncompleted thought, still in process, and their canvases engaged the immediacy of the present with such directness and spontaneity that today, nearly half a century later, they look as if the paint is still wet. . . . For the action painter, the canvas was not a representation but instead an extension of the mind itself, in which the artist “thought” by changing the surface with his or her brush.⁴¹

Some fifty years later, the underlying, nearly obligatory psychological attitude generating the automatist self-expressive, gestural-painterly, modernist creative act has, today, many names. Among the jargon I have heard employed by young art students today—who never, ever mention Bacchus and/or Dionysius—are a variety of standard terms, including “spontaneity,” “getting the force and/or power,”

⁴⁰ For an explanation, with several case-studies, of the application of the “Framing-Themes” (*Rahmenthemen*), see Bialostocki, *Stil und Ikonographie*.

⁴¹ Fineberg, *Art Since 1940*, 35.

“letting yourself go,” “unlocking the true self,” “getting in touch with the vibes,” “channeling,” “tapping into [you name it],” and so forth. Nevertheless, whatever the particular processes of calligraphic execution might be called according to transient verbal fashions (themselves site-specific to mostly popular consumerist culture), unquestionably the universal *raison d’être* of avant-garde “painterly gestures” is due to a uniquely modernist exaltation of the unconscious, thus “automatic,” chance-effect. And that effect, we remind the reader, was first popularized by the likes of Plato. And then, as now, the underlying license was *Inspiration*.

One purpose of this investigation, now that we have established the unquestionable fact of its contemporary pertinence, is to emphasize the hoary antiquity of some of these ideas about the unconscious, thus “automatic,” chance-effect in strictly Western culture. As may be shown in various ways, in a round-about fashion, modernist “Automatism” does additionally turn out to represent effects clearly deriving from a now mostly conveniently forgotten legacy, namely *classical literary theory*. Given the typically blinkered historical consciousness of “modernism”—so often assuming that *everything* significant in art, as much its forms as its ideas, can only derive from the immediate present—this is a discovery which one must find to be, besides enlightening, truly ironic.

Another task performed here has been to expose the role of a much more recent, likewise generally “non-artistic,” contribution. This is another quasi-religious, post-Dionysian, tradition which has shaped, apparently in large measure, both the form and the content, even much of the specific verbalization, currently belonging to the most prestigious avant-garde artistic practises. We have just reiterated the latent presence of a Bacchic-Dionysiac presence, which, we may additionally recall, originated long ago within a strictly *religious context*. Occultism, the modern esoteric tradition, now provides another pertinent “alternative religious” context, and modern occultists do vociferously champion automatist insight and creativity. Therefore, the decisive, second or post-classical, contributory factor—with strictly modern, nineteenth-century, origins—to creative automatism is “Esotericism.”⁴²

⁴² Although their approach on the matter is methodologically different from mine, for current scholarship on the strictly esoteric basis of works by some of the artists discussed here, see the following publications: for Kandinsky’s calligraphic painterly abstraction in particular, see Ringbom, *Sounding Cosmos*; for a model case study of

Perhaps surprisingly (for some students of modernist painting), it turns out that this similarly largely unrecognized historical impulse, “mysticism,” has actually even provided the specific, long since established, formal characteristics—expressive-calligraphic, painterly-dematizing—characterizing the critically approved, orthodox-modernist, “expressive” mode. Unfortunately largely ignored by academic scholarship treating modern art, Occidental Esotericism provides a significant historical context of both distinctive psychology and actual procedures which closely parallel the rise of automatist pictorial abstraction. This is one topic, among several others, which we scholars must confront. To do so, first we had to explore the matter of the largely forgotten contributions of “the Ancients” (*archaios, palaios, antiquus, vetus, priscus*) to modern polemics about creative automatism. Although largely forgotten, the ubiquitous link between Antiquity and Modernism is the latent presence of an ancient god, Dionysus-Bacchus.

Duchamp’s cultural milieu and hermetic sources, see Moffitt, *Alchemist of the Avant-Garde*; for Pollock’s esoteric sources in particular, Theosophy (and otherwise as yet little discussed in a rapidly expanding bibliography on that painter), see particularly Tuchman, *The Spiritual in Art*, 309–11. Tuchman’s scholarly anthology also illustrates (and esoterically explains) numerous post-Pollock examples of calligraphic painterly abstraction. Unfortunately, as yet there exists no single, comprehensive and chronologically linear, historical study of the impact of esoteric beliefs upon various aspects of the evolution of modern art, particularly the “abstract” sort. Mention may, however, be briefly made of a recent attempt at that comprehensive overview: Lipsey, *An Art of Our Own*. Alas, Roger Lipsey’s effort consistently fails as substantial art history (*type iconologique*) because there is little (if any) direct correlation made between the kinds of textual (primary-source) evidence amply available in numerous publications of Esoteric (“Spiritual”) Tradition and numerous statements produced by artists who evidently read (and probably acted upon) those published materials. An earlier effort ascribing a general occultist bias to the motivations lying behind nearly all modern art, particularly its “*gegenstandslosen Malerei*,” is Robsjohn-Gibbings, *Mona Lisa’s Mustache* (1947). Unfortunately, whereas many of Robsjohn-Gibbings’s observations appear correct, at least in retrospect, ultimately his conclusions are denied credibility due to the fact that his purposes were wholly negative, for being essentially anti-modernist, and, worse, he cites no primary documents to support his rather spiteful allegations. Although there are endless publications generally dealing with the Esoteric Tradition—meaning “Occultism”—most are singularly useless because they have been written by True Believers (for instance: Gettings, *The Occult in Art*; Waldo-Schwartz, *Art and the Occult*). Fortunately, there exists a comprehensive history of modern, nineteenth- and twentieth-century, Esotericism that is objective, exhaustive and scholarly; see Webb, *The Occult Underground: The Occult Establishment*—and Webb’s two-volume study should be considered essential reading for all historians investigating *any* facet of modernist culture; also useful is Cornell, *Den hemliga källan*, especially for some Nordic phenomena not stressed by Webb, and also examining some useful art-historical examples,” 139 ff., “Den moderna konsten: ett annat perspektiv.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE INSPIRED SHAMAN-ARTIST: THE CASE OF JOSEPH BEUYS

Neo-Dionysiac Performance Art: The Messianic Example of Joseph Beuys

“Performance art” represents perhaps the most culturally distinctive and formally innovative expression of the culture of the Cold War era. Its most notable exponent was Joseph Beuys (1921–86).¹ (**Fig. 24**) We, following the definition of recognized experts, may take the quintessence of a characteristic postmodernist performance-piece to comprise the following factors: a “live,” usually “anarchic,” largely unscripted and thoroughly ephemeral, emotive expression by (an) impassioned individual(s) propounding certain significant, non-narrative and “conceptual ideas.” The function of all this is usually a self-defining of that individual’s momentary psychic existence through sub-verbal self-declamations; the latter are mainly wrought by corporeally expressive means.²

Performance, probably more so than any other specifically “modern” art form, requires a complicit audience culture. According to Allen Greenberg, “Essential to each [performance] event are at least two elements: the actor or initiator, whether artist or work of art, and the reactor, i.e., the audience. Without someone receiving that which an artist seeks to communicate, there is no social meaning or communicative event.” The other given is the assumption that the modernist event-performer necessarily is: “an artist-intellectual, a person with artistic as well as *socio-political consciousness and conscience*.” And a third given is that this audience culture automatically now consists

¹ ‘The comments on Beuys following largely derive from Moffitt, *Occultism in Avant-Garde Art*.

² For this elastic definition, see Goldberg, *Performance* (my historical sources will considerably expand upon some pre-modernist precedents she only mentions briefly); see also H. Sayre, “Performance,” in Lentricchia and McLaughlin, *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, 91–104. For the strictly corporeal manifestations, see Ramírez, *Corpus Solus*.

of “the committed and [already] convinced, rather than those who remain to be convinced or who are just aloof.”³ Consequently, such artistic transactions present a familiar sociological aspect: the self-exclusionary experience. Such exclusivity characterizes other contemporary *occultist* cults, but they, however, usually make no references (or pretensions) to specifically “artistic” rites of transcendence.

More recently however, especially when used by postmodernists, the term “performance art” becomes thoroughly elastic. As wryly noted by performance-critic Jacki Apple, the designation “performance art” can now

be applied to any aspect of the many-tentacled, star-studded phenomenon of our time: dance, theater, video, audio, cabaret, hi-tech. *Performance* is the word applied to every aspect of mass culture. . . . It is everywhere, commonplace and ordinary, prolific as cockroaches; performance art is advertising, entertainment, fashion, decoration and propaganda. Art is TV, and *terrorism* is “performance” at its most spectacular. As for life, life is a performance, an artifice, a simulacrum. . . .

It is not the boundaries between art and life that have been erased, but those between the art world and the entertainment industry, between art and the media, between life and TV. . . . Art itself is a performance, the artist a performer, and the product merely another designer label commodity in the marketplace. The artist is part of the system [of] marketing, management and media. This is capitalism at work [:] package it and peddle it. . . . Without an audience there is no performance [and] promotion is the name of the game. Without promotion there is no new audience, and promotion costs money. . . . Performance has come of age; it is another pop genre.⁴

That is the broad, current and informed, definition of postmodernist performance art and its audience-culture condition. The situation was, however, different in its previous, “orthodox” modernist applications, especially including Joseph Beuys’s impassioned transactions with his transfixed audiences. Happily, several films of Beuys’s performance activities (*Aktionen*) still exist, so allowing the idle postmodernist viewer to perceive something of their original (Orthodox Modernist) force.⁵ In attempting to approach the larger meaning of the Beuys phenomenon, it will be useful to reexamine the surfaces of its distinctive physiognomy. This particular reconnaissance surveys

³ Greenberg, in Foster, “*Events*” *Art and Art Events*, 113, 119, 121 (emphasis mine).

⁴ Apple, in Herz, *Theories of Contemporary Art* (2nd ed.), 259–62.

⁵ For a catalogue of these, see Stachelhaus, *Beuys*, 208–9.

the terrain under which we shall eventually, like assiduous archaeologists, begin to excavate, with the drills and dental tools of the iconologist, a cultural historian who focuses on art in its various, culturally determined evolutions.⁶

For these archaeological purposes, initially a detailed description of a characteristic Beuys *Aktion*, "The Chief," will serve nicely. (**fig. 25**) This "action-performance" epitomizes, at least on the surface of the art-historical dig, the philosophical ramifications of the classic performances enacted during the 1960s by adherents to the so-called "Fluxus" movement.⁷ Acoustic effects, dance-like body movements, "far-out" (*outré*) music, mumbled mouthings or shoutings, and the manipulation of bizarre materials, all these shaped the format of the quintessential Fluxus event. Beneath the surface, however, Howard Smagula has perceived a shared belief in "*animism*: the conviction that all objects possess hidden life, meaning and vitality." As he affirms, "this philosophical aspect of Fluxus strongly appealed to Beuys's own *mystical belief* in the potential life of certain materials; also, he believed that through their performance-methodology everything could be illustrated. This form turned out to be a perfect vehicle for his didactic art."⁸

Although essentially accurate, these observations still merit some criticisms. While Smagula's argument is correct on one level, it lacks any awareness of the fact that Beuys's "mystical" notions are largely *occultist*.⁹ Moreover, in the art-historical sense, little or no attention has been paid to current scholarly awareness of the esoteric tradition, especially the fact of its obsessive, century-long progress in avant-garde art.¹⁰ This omission confirms the accuracy of recent scholarly observations. In effect, if we do claim, offhandedly and uncritically, that a given artist was beholden to a certain "mystical belief," we then have taken this "mystical" condition for granted, as a given. Accordingly, albeit largely unexamined, it so becomes something like collectively agreed upon art-historical *fact*.

⁶ For this art-historical methodology, see Kaemmerling, *Ikonographie und Ikonologie*.

⁷ For this ephemeral movement, see Armstrong, *In the Spirit of Fluxus*; Battcock, *Art of Performance*; Becker, *Happening, Fluxus, Pop Art, Nouveau Réalisme*; Milman, *Fluxus*.

⁸ Smagula, *Currents*, 229; for the Fluxus context, see Moffitt, *Occultism and Avant-Garde Art*, 45–50.

⁹ In Beuys' case (at least), all this has been thoroughly documented; see Moffitt, *Occultism in Avant-Garde Art*.

¹⁰ For a rare exception, see the essays gathered in Tuchman, *Spiritual in Art*.

Radical artists are apparently now *expected* to work from “mystical beliefs.” We have just examined the historical evidence for their common allegiance to the Artist-Priest-Prophet avocation. The consequence of this tacit assumption, at least in the skeptical view of the art-historical detective, is less than enlightenment. In short, because someone like Beuys is expected to be—and by nature—“mystical,” no one ever seems to bother to find the specific sources of his esoteric beliefs. Furthermore, such unquestioned assumptions seem in themselves to be “occultist,” specifically, *astrological*: it is as though this or that artist had been born under the baleful conjunction of some unnamed “mystical” stars. Such obfuscation-by-omission fails both to specify the exact nature of those mystical beliefs, and to determine the character of their specific effect upon the artist’s choice of imagery. This represents something like the dereliction of an art-historical duty to the production and publication of useful scholarship (versus mere theoretical attitudinizing). Such are the many unasked questions we mean to answer in the course of what follows.

Smagula’s point of interpretive departure is a quintessential “Action” (*Aktion*) performed by Beuys 1964, *The Chief*. (fig. 25) First performed late in 1963 in Copenhagen, it was to be repeated on December 1, 1964, in the temporarily “sanctified” architectural context of the René Block Gallery in Berlin. *The Chief* was a slow, concentrated, meditative, and particularly ceremonial performance piece. It was designed to elicit not outrage but instead a kind of quietest introspection and some meditative questioning (“What does it really mean?”) from the enraptured audience. It was long, too; its transaction took a lot of time, like a Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and the audience for that classy Teutonic stuff likewise knew what to expect. For nine unrelenting hours, the unprepossessing Berlin art gallery was magically transformed by Beuys’s ritualistic activities, oddly combining anachronistic aspects of ancient primitivist ritual with modern high-tech electronics. Such were the provocative New Age media for old-fashioned “consciousness expansion,” a desirable effect, and for which the ancient term was *Inspiration*.

According to an attending German critic, this highly contrived affair had truly portentous and potentially far-reaching consequences. As he stated, it was nothing less than an attack on “indifference and stereotyped thinking,” the kind designed “to set into motion a thrust of energy [*Energieschub*] that would awaken in the audience the sensibility for a human creative existence embracing time and space,

whose complexities would be presented in the sum of the action.”¹¹ (Hmm, even that sounds properly Wagnerian.) Throughout his intense performance—“the sum of the action”—Beuys, who had completely hidden his physical presence within an oblong roll of grey felt, muttered a series of varied sounds, seemingly incantations. These were electronically conveyed to the rapt witnesses by means of a microphone stuck into Beuys’s hermetically sealed felt cocoon. The would-be chrysalis had been wired to an amplifier, allowing Beuys’s hermetic libretto to be projected from a multiple speaker system. The evidently highly effective sound effects included heavy breathing, gurglings, coughs, groans, sighs, and whistles. Predominant, however, was this particular litany (which I transcribe literally): “uh, uh, uh, uh, uh, uh, uh, uh, uh, uh, uh, uh, uh, uh, uh, uh.” This represented, so said Beuys, the poignant, throaty cry of the “wild stag.”

If we grant that Beuys’s *The Chief* was conceived, at least in part, as a kind of media event, then we must also believe that a media representative—acting as witness and chronicler—would eventually have made his presence known in print to the stay-at-home masses huddled outside the pale of this transient gallery experience. In this case, the obligatory testator for the media was Wolf Vostell, and his detailed eye-witness report to *das Volk* quickly appeared (December 12, 1964) in a mass-circulation newspaper, the *Berliner Tagesspiegel*. Because of the invaluable documentary quality of this highly circumstantial and speculative account—including minute measurements, but also reading at times like a transcription of those anachronistic *acti apostolorum* (Acts of the Apostles)—it deserves to be quoted in full. It very nearly (unfortunately, not quite) allows us—mere mortals, reading about it decades later—the sensation of having been *there*, of having *shared* in this uniquely liminal, ego-transformative, conscious-expanding, *inspirational experience*.

As Vostell later explained to his readers in some detail (even including fractional measurements),

During the long soirée at the René Block Gallery there occurred a situation [*eine Umgebung*], a space, a demonstration, or whatever one wants to call it, by Joseph Beuys. . . . It was entitled “*Der Chef-Fluxus-Gesang*” [Chief-Fluxus-Song] and the performance began at 4 p.m. and ended around midnight. What was seen? In a 5 × 8 meter, brightly

¹¹ Adriani (et al.), *Beuys*, 118 [German ed., p. 137].

lit room in the gallery, a roll of felt lay diagonally in the middle of the floor. Inside the roll was Joseph Beuys, a professor at the Düsseldorf Academy of Art.

The felt roll was 2.25 meters long and 46 centimeters wide. At both ends of the roll, as an extension of Beuys [hidden inside], there were two dead rabbits, one being 24 cm wide by 64 cm long, and the other rabbit was 70 cm long and 13 cm wide. On the left wall of the room, and parallel to the lower edge of the walls, ran a 167 cm long by 7 cm wide length of fat, or German margarine. About 165 cm above the floor was a hank of hair, 6 × 7 cm thick, and to the left of this, there were two fingernails, each 1.5 cm wide, and possibly both were fetishes from the unconquered past [*Fetische aus der unbewältigten Vergangenheit*].

In the left corner of the room there was another corner of fat, 30 × 30 cm, with two others by the door, to the right and left hand. In the right corner of the room there was yet another square of fat, 5 × 5 cm. To the left, near Beuys in the roll, a second roll of felt was wrapped around a staff made of copper, 178 cm in length. In the room to the right there was placed an amplifier, registering in minute detail everything that happened in the environment. What was heard? At regular intervals, through his microphone, which loudly amplified them, from his roll, Beuys sent out acoustical messages. One heard: breathing in, breathing out, gurglings in his throat, coughs, sighings, grumblings, hissing, whistling, and a whole encyclopedia of fragmentary sounds: a vocabulary. From a second tape recorder a composition by Eric Anderson and Henning Christiansen was played at quite irregular intervals, apparently to contrast with Beuys's noises.

In the next room of the Gallery (which was otherwise empty that day) was the audience: the curious, hungry seekers after novelty, people sleeping in their clothes, representatives from the press, family members and friends, the disconcerted and the timid, the contemplative ones, those gasping for their breath, those seeking explanations; people sitting, people standing, people. One heard phrases, such as this one: "Unfortunately, I know nothing at all about this; what is it?" Or: "Has Herr Professor Beuys really been inside that roll for eight hours?" Or: "Isn't he hungry?" Or: "Is *this* Fluxus?" Or: "Is this a Happening?" "What are both of these?" [Vostell's answer:] A Happening is a multiple series of events that one must experience with one's own body!! People come and go. Much of the time it is quiet—and even pious, something like a religious, mystical rite [*einem religiösen, mystischen Akt*].

Is it then Ritual? Many had waited (but for what?). Some finally saw Beuys climb out of his roll at twelve midnight. One of them asked him a direct question: "Why did you recommend that the [Berlin] wall be raised by five centimeters?" Beuys's reply: "On the wall there are two kinds of men who are pushing against one another, who have independently developed in different situations. That could only happen here [in Berlin]!" Beuys loves all men [*Beuys liebt alle Menschen*].

For the majority of the public, this represented an encounter with Beuys, his impulses and his notions about sculptural form. For the rest, it was just a reason to see one another again. Socializing? Or should Beuys's tragic "Fluxus Song" instead really pose for them a riddle? Often it appears to do so; but then, again, there is just laziness: personal and familiar chitchat about the problems of daily life. But, here and there, there is devotion, and wonderment for [Beuys's] display. Is it a funeral rite? This is another factor.

Beuys calls his work a demonstration of a sculptural principle. Very few of the people were aware that he had by another means [i.e., magically] transported the roll of felt, with the copper staff that had lain near him, namely by means of himself and the two rabbits. This reminded me of an African who, at the gathering of his sect, had played at being a locomotive for an hour. Does that mean then that the locomotive replaces itself as sculpture, as an event? That Beuys [replaces himself] as sculpture? That the whole environment becomes sculpture? Is it to let oneself become an Event? Is it to be sculpture and [at the same time] alive?

Beuys said: "I am a transmitter; I radiate out" Is this a cultic act [*eine kultische Handlung*]? What did Beuys really think about as he lay within his roll? What did the audience in Berlin think? What did the dead rabbits think: can dead hares actually think [*können tote Hasen eigentlich denken*]? What did the corner of fat actually think? Can sculptures made of fat actually think? [Is it meant] to bring us to a state of reflection? *Ja!* Will the image persist?

These are all [inscrutable] questions and answers offered to us by Beuys. In deciphering them, our uncertainty is immense; but that is also good. In any case, the evening was rather more like a road leading to a philosophical theatre.¹²

So, as attested to by Wolf Vostell, what are the effects of, and the questions still posed by that provocative "*Weg zum philosophischen Theater*" so ambiguously presented to us by Herr Professor Joseph Beuys? Whereas we are told that these effects were based upon "the newest ideas," nevertheless the questions posed were timeless, at least for those sufficiently sensitive to perceive them. "What is it?" was, of course, not the proper reaction. On the other hand, the notion of "a riddle" seemed more acceptable, particularly one resembling those once posed by the Sphinx. It all seemed, somehow, "tragic." For the insensitives observed by Vostell, it was merely an opportunity to "socialize" (but not surprisingly, given the latent pseudo-event context). Moreover, merely to see, rather than actively witness, this

¹² W. Vostell, in *ibid.*, 119–24 [139–45].

event is just to fall into another bout of laziness, thus to miss the experience of “wonderment,” or even, for the really hypersensitive, true “devotion.”

Such were the positive effects of *The Chief*, that is, after one had been forcibly driven to a proper state of “reflection.” It is, after all, “a good thing” when the whole effort seems so difficult to decipher, especially as due to all these wonderful “questions and riddles,” leaving *das Volk* “gasping for its breath.” In sum, and as Vostell had correctly guessed, this *was* pure “ritual,” nothing more or less than *eine kultische Handlung*, “a cultic act.” More specifically, it was explicitly *einem religiösen, mystischen Akt*, “a religious, mystical rite.” Vostell knew this for he, as an accredited Fluxus acolyte, was already thoroughly initiated into the cultic, mystical or esoteric, act. And let us not forget that all such designated “cultic acts” represent *inspired* and rampantly esoteric rituals only really made truly accessible, and hence emotionally profitable, to the already *initiated*. And, equally, their real historic sources are perfectly obvious: the Dionysiac *mysteria*. Such “Dionysiac” effects (although not so labeled) were commonplace in Beuys’ transfiguring performance art, including his famous (or notorious) enactment of “How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare” (*Wie man dem toten Hasen die Bilder erklärt*), first executed in November 1965.¹³

*The “Inspired” Modern Shaman-Artist Mirrored in
Historical Records of Magical Practice*

Joseph Beuys is unquestionably an influential figure in non-orthodox postmodernist art expression; his followers are (still) legion.¹⁴ It is notorious that that this highly lionized artist performed as a “shaman.” Beuys was quite explicit about his approach to *shamanism* when, speaking with Caroline Tisdall (as we shall see), he described this archaic practice as “the deepest root” of his idea of “spiritual life.” Evidently, some two-thousand years later, such cathartic theatrical art has returned to its original Dionysian roots, that is, in sheer “ecstasy,”

¹³ For this especially celebrated *Aktion*, see Moffitt, *Occultism in Avant-Garde Art*, 153–58.

¹⁴ On this point, and naming the subsequent perpetrators, see Ramírez, *Corpus Solus*.

pure religiosity, “*Inspiration*” in short. Since the term Beuys employed, “Shamanism,” has since been routinely adopted by hordes of youthful “performance artists” and other sensitive postmodernist creative aspirants,¹⁵ it really calls for some objective definition.

This task is probably better done by sober-minded people who both do not fancy themselves “artists” and who, as such, just might have an informed grasp on history. On this point of definition, I. M. Lewis, a noted British anthropologist and student of “Spirit Possession,” is quite emphatic: shamans are “*inspired priests*.” By their reckoning,

The inspired priest, or shaman, who has privileged access to these supernatural powers, diagnoses sins and prescribes the appropriate atonement. . . . With this and other common features in mind, spirit possession and shamanism have also been viewed as a pre-scientific psychotherapy. . . . Here the shaman is seen in a historical perspective as a primitive psychiatrist. . . . In healing dance ceremonies to the accompaniment of singing and hand-clapping, adult men [now including countless “performance artists”] work themselves into a state of trance. . . . The shaman is an inspired priest who, in ecstatic trance, ascends to the heavens on “trips.” . . . In the course of these journeys he persuades or even fights with the gods in order to secure [spiritual] benefits for his fellow men.¹⁶

So did Joseph Beuys!

Amidst all this devotional rapture, what is now additionally called for is a measure of *real* historical context. This is called for since most people now writing about the supposed “uniqueness” of modernist art seem to treat it as the by-product of extraterrestrial (or at least a-temporal) *parthenogenesis* (“virgin-birth”). As it turns out, the kinds of “cultic acts” described by Vostell have been around a long time, in fact long (long) before the advent, and subsequent popularity of Cold War-era performance art. Although ignored, this observation rests upon solid historical *fact*. Among many recorded examples, here is one that took place around two millennia ago, in Hellenistic Egypt. Ironically, transcriptions of several of these ancient magical rites read just like the circumstantial data given in any one of the many descriptions of Beuys’s *Aktionen* (**fig. 25**) provided by various,

¹⁵ This drift towards the “Shamanic Spirit” is, for instance, endlessly reiterated in Tucker, *Dreaming with Open Eyes*.

¹⁶ Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion* (new ed.), 29, 32, 43, 172.

typically enthralled, eyewitnesses, including Wolf Vostell. According to the detailed instructions found on one antique papyrus roll:

Keep yourself pure for seven days, and then go on the third day of the new moon to a place which the receding Nile has just laid bare. Make a fire on two upright bricks with olive-wood, that is to say thin wood, when the sun is half-risen, after having before sunrise circum-ambulated the altar. But when the sun's disc is clear above the horizon, decapitate an immaculate, pure-white cock; holding it in the crook of your left elbow, circumambulate the altar before sunrise. Hold the cock fast by your knees and decapitate it with no one else holding it. Throw the head into the river, catch the blood in your right hand and drink it up. Put the rest of the body on the burning altar and jump into the river. Dive under, in the clothes you are wearing; then, stepping backwards, climb on to the bank. Put on new clothes and go away without turning around. After that, take the gall of a raven and rub some of it with the wing of an ibis on your eyes—and you will be consecrated.¹⁷

And here are the instructions for another Beuys-like action from the same ancient source:

Throw the drawn figure, the one which you have drawn with myrrh-ink and wrapped up in a piece of garment [felt?] belonging to someone violently slain, below, into the hot-water furnace. But some say not into the furnace, as the effect is too violent. Instead, they hang it over the light, or place it under the light. In another papyrus I have found, it is stated like this: If he [the invoked god] still does not hear you, wrap up the [modeled] figure in the same rag and throw it into the bath-furnace on the fifth day of the invocation, and say as you do it: “Abri and Abro, Exantiabil, God of Gods, King of Kings, now force a friendly prophetic daimon to come to me, that I may not have to proceed to worse punishments, to those written on these strips.”¹⁸

However, rather than “Abri and Abro, Exantiabil,” Joseph Beuys had actually mumbled something that sounded like “uh, uh, uh, *uh*, uh, uh, uh, uh, *uh*, uh, uh, uh.” In any event, Joseph Beuys knew, just as the notorious modern magician Alesteir Crowley had written in 1929, the true practitioner of “Magick” must employ “long strings of formidable words which roar and moan through so many conjurations.”¹⁹

¹⁷ “Papyri Graecae Magicae,” as cited in Butler, *Ritual Magic*, 10.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁹ Crowley, in *ibid.*, 66.

Now here is another cult action, enacted in a wholly different period, and it was described in *Le Livre de Salomon* (ca. 1350):

Than shall the Exorcist, or Master of Magical Art, with an assured air and a grave and imperious voice, order and command him to be tranquil, to keep the rest of his attendants peaceable and to impose silence upon them. Let him also renew his fumigations, and so offer large quantities of incense, which he should at once place upon the fire, in order to appease the Spirits, as he hath promised them. He should then cover the Pentacles, and he will see wonderful things, which it is impossible to relate, touching worldly matters and all sciences. This being finished, let the Master uncover the Pentacles, and demand all that he shall wish from the King of the Spirits [etc.].²⁰

Here is yet another description of a Beuys *Aktion*, but (surprise!) this one took place five-hundred years before Beuys was a boy. As was reported in the inquisitorial trial of the so-called “Bluebeard of Orléans,” Gilles de Rais (1404–40), he and his surreptitious ceremonial followers,

having lights or torches of wax and other things, and with the said book which they took with them, they made several circles with characters and signs, like coats-of-arms, with the point of a sword on the ground. . . . After the construction of the circle and the characters, and having lit the fire, at the command of Gilles de Retz [Rais] all the above named left the hall and they then entered the circle. And in the angles, near the walls, they made other characters, lit the coal in the earthen pots, and strewed magnetic powder on it, and incense, myrrh, and aloes, from which a fragrant smoke arose. And they remained there, sometimes standing, sometimes seated, and sometimes with bent knees, adoring and sacrificing to the demons. For about the space of two hours, they were invoking, and with intent to invoke, the demon, sometimes reading to him from the said book, and waiting for the demons invoked to appear. But on this occasion, or so he declares, nothing appeared.²¹

Now here is yet another description of a magical cult action, one also likely known to Joseph Beuys, since it appears in Johann Grimm’s *Deutsche Sagen* (“German Proverbs,” 1816):

There was at Nüremberg a man called Paul Creuz, who made use of a wonderful conjuration. On a certain spot he placed a little table, which was quite new, and put a white cloth on it, with two little bowls

²⁰ “Key of Solomon,” in *ibid.*, 57.

²¹ “Le Procès Inquisitorial,” as in *ibid.*, 109.

of milk, two little saucers of honey, two little plates, and nine little knives. Then he took a black pullet and, over a kitchen brazier, he slaughtered it in such a way that the blood mingled with the food. After that, he threw one half to the east and the other to the west. He then went and hid behind a big tree, and he saw that two little dwarfs, who had come up out of the ground, had seated themselves at the table and had eaten over the precious incense-burner which he had also placed there. . . . After several [similar] occasions, they became so familiar with him, that they lived like guests in his house.²²

And here is yet another *völkisch* tale of magical and metallic figures and diagrams; this was told in 1846 by Johann Scheible in *Das Kloster* (“The Cloister”). Whether or not it was actually known to Joseph Beuys, it certainly does sound like (another) transcription of one of his celebrated avant-garde *Aktionen* (**fig. 25**). According to Scheible’s “white-magical” description:

The magical circle must be made of good lead, on which the prescribed names must be beaten with the words: “Strengthened against all evil spirits and devils”: these words must be uttered at each stroke. The triangle must be laid in it later, and it is to be made thus: Take three chains from a gallows, and nails from a wheel; these are nails which have been hammered through the head of a man broken upon the wheel. Weld them together on the night of Good Friday, between eleven and twelve, saying with every stroke: “Peter, bind it!” Go on hammering, until it attains the size of a triangle in which four persons can turn about, and now weld it together with copper.

When the circle is ready, which must have three ells in diameter, and the holy work of conjuration is about to begin, lay it down near water, six ells distant from it. Sprinkle the place with holy water and shake glowing coals, salt and incense upon it. Change your shoes, and you others, who are only witnesses of the proceedings, you have to step on to the angles of the triangle. Do so in such a fashion that the one dressed in black stands on the angle marked *b*; the one in red on *c*; and the one in white on *d*. And let each one have a waxen candle, that is one which has burned by the bier of a corpse. This is to be held in the right hand, and a dagger in the left. The operator must however lay a piece of lime-wood, also triangular in shape, into the middle of the triangle, and must step on to it barefoot. He does so after having put on a leather cap, and after having girt his loins with the cloth used by an executioner to wipe his sword after having beheaded some miserable criminal.²³

²² Grimm, as in *ibid.*, 171.

²³ Scheible, as in *ibid.*, 200.

Similar attention to ceremonial detail, also costuming, even distinctive headgear, belongs also to “Black Magic.” This we learn from the description of some “Infernal Evocations” given in Eliphas Lévi’s *Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie* (1856):

Offer a bloody sacrifice; procure a magic fork, which is a branch of a single bough of hazel or almond. This is to be cut at one blow with the new knife used for the sacrifice. It must terminate in a fork, which must be armored with iron or steel, made from the blade of the knife just mentioned. . . . The evocation should be performed on the night between Monday and Tuesday, or that between Friday and Saturday. A solitary and forbidden spot must be chosen, such as a cemetery haunted by evil spirits, or a dreaded ruin in the country, or the vaults of an abandoned convent. . . .

A black, seamless and sleeveless, robe must be provided; also a leaden cap emblazoned with the signs of the moon, Venus and Saturn. There must also be two candles made of human fat; these are set in black wooden candlesticks, carved in the shape of a crescent. Also required are two crowns of vervain; a magical sword with a black handle; the magical fork; a copper vase, containing the blood of the victim; a censer holding perfumes, namely incense, camphor, aloes, ambergris and storax.

All this is to be mixed together with the blood of a goat, a mole and a bat. You also need four nails taken from the coffin of an executed criminal; the head of a black cat which has been nourished on human flesh for five days; a bat drowned in blood; the horns of a goat *cum quo puella concubuerit* [which just screwed a girl], [etc.].²⁴

Another kind of “magic” is the kind specifically associated with objects specifically identified as “works of art,” and which finally began to affect strictly modernist artists. Among many other artists one could cite, there is the case of Pablo Picasso, here when he was referring to a so-called “primitive” object. In 1907, Picasso discovered African tribal art, the function of which he saw as “magical”; afterwards, he often incorporated tribal stylization and motifs into his paintings. As he stated much later,

Men had made those masks and other objects for a sacred purpose, a magic purpose, as a kind of mediation between themselves and the unknown hostile forces that surrounded them, in order to overcome their fear and horror by giving it a form and an image. At that moment I realized that this was what painting was all about. Painting isn’t an

²⁴ Lévi, as cited in *ibid.*, 97.

aesthetic operation; it's a form of *magic* . . . a way of seizing power by giving form to our terrors as well as our desires.²⁵

In any event, we have already presented other kinds of complementary evidence amply documenting the commonplace fascination of the “liberated,” also inevitably “inspired,” modern artist with such rampantly esoteric endeavors. Now let us deal with the complementary issue of primitivist *magic*, namely (and specifically) “shamanism,” the kind explicitly acknowledged by Beuys to be focused “in the mythical connection of animal and man in totemism, and in magic in general.”²⁶ Beuys was once quite explicit about his approach to shamanism in speaking with Caroline Tisdall. As he told her, he took this practice to express “the deepest root” of the idea of spiritual life:

I take this form of ancient behavior as the idea of transformation through concrete processes of life, nature and history. My intention is obviously not to return [literally] to earlier cultures, but to stress the idea of transformation and substance. That is precisely what the shaman does in order to bring about change and development [in others]: his nature is therapeutic. . . . While shamanism marks a point in the past, it also indicates the possibility for [future] historical development. . . . So when I appear as a kind of shamanistic figure, or [deliberately] allude to it, I do it to stress my belief in other priorities [than those of capitalist materialism] and the need to come up with a completely different plan for working with substances. For instance, in places like universities, where everyone speaks so rationally, it is necessary for a kind of enchanter to appear.²⁷

Indeed: the tendentious and politicized postmodernist university could really use some “enchantment.” On yet another occasion, an interview in 1981 with Erika Billeter, Beuys stated:

Today, there are pieces of action art where the character of the shaman still seems for me to be the most suitable. However [I do so] not in order to point to the past, in the sense that we [literally] needed to go back where the shaman had his legitimacy, but because of the spiritual context [of his act]. I do, however, use this character [the shaman] to tell something about the future, by saying that the shaman represented something that was able to unify material aspects as well as the spiritual contexts. To refer to this character in the age of materialism

²⁵ Picasso, in Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art*, 116.

²⁶ Adriani (et al.), *Beuys*, 71 [83].

²⁷ Tisdall, *Beuys*, 23.

means to point [with calculation] to something in the future. So the only important reason why I play the role of the shaman is in order to express a tendency of regression, meaning back to the past, back into the womb—but [this is] regression in the sense of progression, towards the logic of the future.²⁸

In her well-documented study on the perennial *Myth of the Magus*, E. M. Butler cites various historical texts explicating the magic-making phenomenon, such as it existed long before it was specifically called the work of “shamans” (or perhaps “shapersons” presently). The verb used then, that is, by ancient Hellenes, was *mageyein*, meaning “to enchant, to bewitch, to charm.”²⁹ Today, we call it “Magic.” Like Joseph Beuys much later (and some “inspired” Dionysian celebrants much earlier), such magicians usually saw themselves invested with a universal healing mission. Instructions given by one such shamanic healer were recorded by the ancient Greek thinker Empedocles:

By my instructions you shall learn medicines that are powerful to cure diseases, and to re-animate old age. You shall be able to calm the savage winds which lay waste the labors of the husbandman, and when you wish, send forth the tempest again. You shall cause the skies to be fair and serene, or more shall draw down refreshing showers, re-animating the fruits of the earth. . . . I am [thanks to my special gifts] revered by both men and women, inquiring the road to boundless wealth, seeking the gift of prophecy . . .³⁰

Another of the ancient wonder-workers was Zoroaster, or the “Zarathustra” who also spoke to Friedrich Nietzsche (who was also read by Beuys). The esteem Zoroaster was accorded way back then sounds like the kind posthumously enjoyed by Joseph Beuys. As was stated in an ancient Persian text,

There is manifested in him a mind which is more capacious than the whole world, and more exalted than every worldly possession, with an understanding whose strength is perfectly selected, an intellect of all-acquiring power, and a sagacity of all-deciding ability. He is also endowed with the full desire for righteousness, efficacious diligence and authority, and even the superiority in mightiness and grandeur of strength which are in his character . . . besides a perfect friendship for the sacred beings and the good, and an awful enmity for the demons and the vile. . . .

²⁸ Beuys, in Billeter, *Mythos und Ritual in der Kunst der siebziger Jahre*, 89.

²⁹ Butler, *Myth of the Magus*, 20.

³⁰ Empedocles, in *ibid.*, 9.

One marvel is his disclosure, given in complete beneficence, secretly and completely, of medical knowledge, an acquaintance with character and other professional retentiveness, of what is necessary for legal knowledge and spiritual perception; also the indication, by revelation, of the rites for driving out pestilence, overpowering the demon and witch, and for disabling sorcery and witchcraft. He practices the curing of disease, the counteraction of wolves and noxious creatures, the liberating of rain and the confining of hail, spiders, locusts, and other terrors of corn and plants, and all the adversaries of animals, all of which he does by the marvelous rites. And [he practices] the disclosure to mankind of many running waters from marvelous streams, and remedies for sickness, which are missed by otherwise well-considering physicians.³¹

Another ancient historical prototype for Joseph Beuys was King Solomon, and, likewise, “God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding exceeding much, and largeness of heart.” So burdened, likewise “he spake three thousand proverbs: and his songs were a thousand and five.” Like Beuys, “he spake of trees, from the cedar tree that is in Lebanon even unto the hyssop that springeth out of the wall: he spake also of beasts, and of fowl, and of creeping things, and of fishes.” And, just as happened to Beuys, “there came all people to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from the kings of the earth, which had heard of his wisdom.”³²

Obviously, I could quote many, many more pseudo-religious statements to the same effect. But there is no need to: you get the point. Henceforth, whenever you hear from someone else, or read elsewhere, how Joseph Beuys had performed as a “shaman” or “magician,” you will now know that he really, *literally meant* to do so. Besides partaking of a more-or-less routine, modernist neo-Dionysianism, it is obviously pure occultism: “magic,” and its basis can be nothing else. All right, if you insist, you may also add “art” on top, like salad-dressing. In any event, whatever you do call it, even “art,” as Carl Sagan reminds us, “Magic requires tacit cooperation of the audience with the magician—an abandonment of skepticism, or what is sometimes described as the willing suspension of disbelief. It immediately follows that to penetrate the magic, to expose the trick, we must cease collaborating [and] bear in mind that no client [the audience culture] can be wholly uncontaminated by the [motifs] in pop-

³¹ Pahlavi, in *ibid.*, 23, 27–28.

³² *I Kings* 4:29–34.

ular culture.”³³ In short, as in magic so, too, in art: you are either wholly with the program—that is, you willingly perform an active psychological participant—or you do not.

Beuys's Aktionen as a Modern Cult Action

A “cult action,” like the one performed by Beuys, and just as that *kultische Handlung* was described in detail by Wolf Vostell, obviously presupposes the existence of a more-or-less cohesive group, a body of people holding certain interests or beliefs in common. To them, a very specific kind of “inspired” audience culture, the ritual action portends significance; to the outsider, of course, it probably means nothing whatsoever. As with any “foreign” language, one must be *initiated* into the operating principles and governing rules of the cult action. Without any knowledge of these, there is no inner connection, no communication.

The Beuys phenomenon—regardless of what Beuys himself signified—must also take into account the nature of its audience, of its committed promoters and of its most avid consumers. Interest in such matters involves what art historians call “reception theory.” Thus, the Beuys phenomenon, formerly only treated as a peripheral object of art-historical interest, must itself be interpreted within the timeless context of crowd psychology. The lone artist is one thing, the heterogeneous crowd-audience is perhaps something quite different. This critical distinction was perhaps best summarized by the poet Friedrich Schiller: “Anyone, taken as an individual, is tolerably sensible and reasonable; taken as a member of a crowd, he at once becomes a blockhead.” Certainly the study of crowd psychology—and of its manipulation—is nothing new. Just as Charles Mackay observed way back in 1852 in his classic study on *The Madness of Crowds*,

In reading the history of nations, we find that, like individuals, they have their whims and their peculiarities; their seasons of excitement and recklessness, when they care not what they do. We find that whole communities suddenly fix their minds upon one object, and go mad in its pursuit: that millions of people become simultaneously impressed

³³ Sagan, *Demon-Haunted World*, 173.

with one delusion, and run after it, till their attention is caught by some new folly, more captivating than the first. . . . Men, it has been well said, think in herds; it will be seen that they go mad in herds, while they only recover their senses slowly, and one by one.³⁴

The context of Beuys's prestigious performances and, particularly, the lair of their adoring audiences is the generic "City." It is particularly in the teeming metropolis where "men [women, too] think in herds." The modernist urban setting, and its highly specialized psychological conditionings, are essential to a general understanding of the Beuys phenomenon, indeed to the very meaning of modernism itself. Thus, according to Mackay,

The popular humours of a great city are a never-failing source of amusement. . . . But, like all other earthly things, [any particular fashion] has its season, and passes away as suddenly as it arose, never again to be the pet and idol of the populace. A new claimant drives it from its place, and holds undisputed sway, till, in its turn, it is hurled from its pre-eminence, and a successor appointed in its stead. . . . These are the whimsies of the mass, the harmless follies by which they unconsciously endeavour to lighten the load of care which presses upon their existence.³⁵

More specifically, and just as Wolf Vostell called it, at bottom the "inspired" Beuys *performance* is really "a cult action"; it is, moreover, just like "a religious, mystical rite," and the fundamental nature of this has been tenaciously confused because of its persistent denomination as "art." We, instead, have called it a resurgence of the pseudo-religious "Dionysian" impulse, *Inspiration*, and its modern progenitor was Friedrich Nietzsche, whom we know Beuys (among many others) had read.

Whatever you choose to call it, it has a native tradition however, and—a century before Beuys—one of the greatest faith-healers in Germany was Valentine Zeileis. His actions were commented upon by a contemporary, Alexander Castiglioni, and his observations are worth recalling for they include many features appearing much later in "healing" séances performed by Joseph Beuys and his shamanistic artistic progeny. In this case, Zeileis made "'contact' between the healer and the patient by means of a magic wand touching the body [and] healing is brought about by this contact, repeated three or

³⁴ Mackay, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions*, xix–xx.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 619–31.

four times.” Perhaps even more important to the cult action is, as in the case of the classic Zeileis performance piece, “the ‘atmosphere,’ the magical aspect of the room, weirdly lighted by pieces of apparatus which throw off intermittent beams of light, with streaks of sparks.”

Whether the operator was Valentine Zeileis or Joseph Beuys, also essential to Castiglioni was: “the thaumaturgic aspect of the healer, who appears in a priestly costume [which] gives him a venerable appearance [as does] the play of words that appear mysterious to the profane, who know little or nothing of the helium lamp, or radium-bearing alloys, and of ultra-violet rays.” Also fundamental to such neo-Dionysiac performances are: “the long wait of the patients [or audience], the suggestion exerted on them by the atmosphere, pervaded with conviction of the miraculous power of Zeileis, and, above all, the enormous prosperity that his abilities have brought to him, to his collaborators, and to the whole district.” In short, “these features give rise to reciprocal and collective *suggestion*, manifested through phenomena that have been amply studied by specialists in mass psychology.”³⁶ But not, however, by art historians!

Nonetheless, many have attested to Beuys’s psychic empowerment over his audiences and, particularly, his students. His biographer, Heiner Stachelhaus, sums it up: “He was an extraordinary, charismatic, persuasive, spell-binding teacher. . . . There is no doubt about it: as a professor the man was a fanatic, completely unsparing of himself. Beuys required intensive dialogue with his students. Beuys inevitably attracted students in increasing numbers. . . . Every aspect of Beuys’s utterly unprofessorial conduct left a deep impression on the young. Students poured into his class.”³⁷ On the other hand, one of his Düsseldorf teaching colleagues saw a dark side, in effect an ominous, neo-Dionysian impulse, to this cult-like pedagogical charisma:

Beuys and his students are *enthusiasts*. The Master’s fanatical disciples swarm through the Academy like mediums under remote control; they whisper and buzz like so many busy insects; they are clever, eager, bustling, like Mao’s little Chinese. . . . Fear seems to be his mainspring; it is deep and ubiquitous within him. Technology is evil [according to Beuys]; the present day is evil, automobiles are dreadful, computers

³⁶ A. Castiglioni, as quoted in Rawcliffe, *Occult and Supernatural Phenomena*, 208.

³⁷ Stachelhaus, *Beuys*, 80–81.

inhuman, televisions likewise; rockets are horrible, splitting atoms destroys the world; [he espouses] backward-looking escapism, human betterment, yearning for the past. . . . He plays the Messiah; he wants the [Art] Academy to take over the role of the Church.³⁸

And what might one of those modernist “specialists in mass psychology” have to say about such “suggestive” performances and their magician instigators, be they a Beuys or a Zeileis? As was explained by a British psychologist, D. H. Rawcliffe (who surely never even heard of Joseph Beuys, nor any other standard, “avant-garde” practitioner of “performance art”),

The more extreme types of suggestion depend for their effect upon the degree of personal *conviction* which the subject [or audience] holds in regard to the idea suggested [and] the effectiveness of suggestion depends mainly on the degree to which the subject’s mind is deprived of its faculty for criticism—*both rational and irrational*. . . . Among those many factors which help to make the subject’s mind susceptible to the irrational influence of ideas, is the personality of the agent from whom the suggestion originates. Roughly speaking, the agent’s [or Beuys’s] power of suggestion depends upon whatever conduces to render him impressive to the subject. Under this very wide heading we may include all those factors conducive to respect of authority, such as an official position, age and experience, superior talents, confident and authoritative manner, rank, celebrity, wealth and social position.

We must include also the subject’s beliefs concerning the agent’s [or Beuys’s] general reputation: the agent must be universally respected, may be considered frightening or mysterious, ascetic or holy, or a person in touch with the divine. But for the operation of suggestion, more important than all these consideration, is the personality of the agent himself: commanding presence, strong distinctive features, a faculty of winning people’s confidence, a pleasing voice, an ability to “put it across,” powerful physique, a gift for words, a flair for touching off emotions, a character which possesses the power of gaining the respect, fear, reverence, love or devotion of others. . . . Generally speaking, a group or body of people are more susceptible to the uncritical acceptance of ideas and beliefs than is a single individual.³⁹

In fact, Beuys’s atavistic aesthetic stance, albeit today perhaps the most publicized, is scarcely unique: a great many contemporary avant-

³⁸ Norbert Kricke, as in *ibid.*, 94–95.

³⁹ Rawcliffe, *Occult and Supernatural Phenomena*, 44–45 (author’s emphasis). For more on “suggestive” states induced by self-styled “faith-healers,” see Sargant, *The Mind Possessed*, citing many case-studies, none however called “art,” that were actually witnessed by the author.

garde artists have today willfully invested themselves with shamanic status and the prestige that apparently goes with it. In fact, a lavishly illustrated paperback book by Michael Tucker is entirely devoted to the *outré* subject of “the return of the Western mind to the ancient shamanic idea of the artist as visionary healer.”⁴⁰ According to this earnest (but not awfully *kunstwissenschaftlich*) author, many such helpful artist-healers deserve our attention, even devotion; his catalogue of unquestionably inspired artist-healers includes the enlightened likes of Helen Chadwick, Brian Catling, Cecil Collins, Alan Davie, Steve Dilworth, Mary Beth Edelson, Anton Heyboer, Andrej Jackowski, Asger Jorn, Bengt Lindström, Norval Morrisseau, Monica Sjöö, Jon Reydal, Frans Widerberg, among others. (And, no, I haven’t heard of most of them either.)

Many other artists, with much more prestigious—or recognizable—names, are cited by Mr. Tucker, but, alas (other than Beuys), the earnest author presents no proof that *they* ever specifically saw themselves as burdened with the healing mission retroactively ascribed to them. Unfortunately, additionally this author also does not cite any scientific research attesting to any proof of *any* real, positive and quantifiable, effects accruing from such ubiquitously performed “spiritual healing” and as so plentifully practiced currently by these dedicated artist-medics. (And no such “therapy” is covered by my HMO. Nor yours, either.) Moreover, if so many artists are actually doing about the very same thing—and at the very same time—is their mutual pursuit, however noble-minded in its stated purposes, not perhaps better to be qualified as representing just another trendy cliché?

Since this handsomely designed, and most sincerely argued volume, is likely to become obligatory reading for Gen-X art students, it seems useful to quote Tucker’s definitions of “shamanistic art.” That way you can recognize it as you—evermore—run across it. The basic argument is that when the modern artist functions as a “shaman,” then his/her role becomes expressive of “the archetypal, essential idea of *the artist as seer and healer*.” Operating from such an equally inspired and therapeutic predisposition, he/she holds that “there must be a return to the symbolism of the cosmos; a revivification of archaic

⁴⁰ Tucker, *Dreaming with Open Eyes*, also citing in his bibliography other authors celebrating shaman-artists, the names of whom are, likewise, mostly unknown to you or me.

principles of creativity, drawn from the deepest layers of an integrated psyche.” That sounds most impressive, but what does it *look* like? Recognizably “shamanic pictures” are those, argues Tucker, which purposely incorporate “power needed to stimulate transformative, shamanic qualities of consciousness in the onlooker—and in such art, there may well be not a single (exotic) shaman in sight.”

Since that is not very helpful, since no real iconographic and/or stylistic description is provided to us here, then I guess we must rely on the self-designating, specifically “shamanic,” captions retroactively attached to this kind of earnest imagery. Still, one way or another, such imagery is designed, says Tucker, “to channel a potentially destructive abundance of sensual energy into a transformative celebration of the *wholeness* of the world—a wholeness which included the artist’s own transformed and transforming consciousness of that world.” One way to achieve desirable artistic “healing potentialities” is clearly by means of “animistic, tribal-like imagery and child-like wonder.” Moreover, says Tucker, “to sense a shamanic note in life is to begin to intuit the wholeness of existence, the interdependence of self and world, body, soul and spirit.” Currently, the obviously “inspired” vanguard artist’s purpose must be, according to Tucker’s wholly “New Age” prescriptions, the task of “‘re-animating’ a world which monotheistic religion and mechanistic science have done much to deaden.”⁴¹

As this professional art historian now dimly recalls, there was once a time when a given picture or sculpture only had to “please”—and that means *visually*—its designated, presumably literate, hence elitist, audience culture. That once familiar prescription—*delectare, docere, per-movere*—was long ago made familiar to a literate audience culture by the Roman rhetoricians. Alas, that venerable artistic admonition—“To delight, instruct, and so move to action”—seems since to have gone largely obsolescent, and mostly beginning with the Romantic artists and poets. Obviously, *real* artists are presently much less frivolous; now they are properly propelled by, are “inspired” by a real sense of therapeutic mission. Now comprising the uniquely *inspired* “Artist-Priest-Prophet” class of our times, the thronging, postmodernist Shaman-Artists are to be reckoned the true heirs of Dionysus.

⁴¹ Ibid., 1, 50–51, 65, 71, 77 (et passim).

CHAPTER TWELVE

SOMETHING LIKE A POST-MODERNIST FINALE

A Disgruntled Postmodernist Perspective on "Inspiration"

In this case, one's final conclusion is that, for better or for worse, it was really the fin-de-siècle Symbolists, especially their writer-theorists, who really "invented" modern art. They were the ones who first enthusiastically advocated a timely kind of "abstract" art. And let us not forget that they were also the ones who first coined a now ubiquitous term and practice, "self-expression," *l'expressionisme*. For them, whether stated explicitly or only implicitly, a central factor in properly "self-expressive" artistic creation was the traditional, "ecstatic" and "intoxicated," Dionysiac impulse, *l'inspiration* in short. A further conclusion, which is rather more obvious, is that it was really the *post*-Symbolist painters and sculptors who made the self-expressive idea "look" like modern art, but they did not really get around communally to establishing that collective Look until *after* 1910, and, by then, the vanguard results were mainly dubbed "Cubist" or "Expressionist."

That said, we may now recall the archeological findings produced by our initial investigation, with this dealing with the particular etiology of a certain kind of "Inspiration" to which the modern artist (still) fancies himself uniquely privy. Certainly this is a feature which was not dealt with, at least not in *this* way, by standard classical authors, and certainly not by medieval scholars. Accordingly, the enormous prestige currently accorded to this "divine gift" is a strictly post-medieval phenomenon, meaning that, initially, it was largely invented by writer-theorists during the Renaissance. Through an exhaustive analysis of the cultural contexts belonging to a single work of art, Michelangelo's *Drunken Bacchus* (1496/7: **fig. 1**), we have uncovered significant evidence pointing to the real historical origins of the majority of modern interpretations of artistic *Inspiration*, and these we found to be mostly derived initially from the mythic contexts ascribed to certain Neoplatonic "Mysteries" celebrated in Florence at the end of the Quattrocento.

By way of the Surrealists, such as they were particularly influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche, with complementary conclusions further amplified by the Symbolists in France, who then opportunely wedged the whole Bacchic syndrome into a context of “art theory,” the ancient Dionysian phenomenon was re-situated once again within a uniquely inspired, twentieth-century phenomenon, “Orthodox Modernism.” Accordingly, in the twentieth century detailed explanations of the evermore prestigious “creative process” became a publishing phenomenon in their own right. These published accounts may presently be produced by either artists and writers, with these scripts explaining how their authors were, typically, *involuntarily* impelled by “inspiration” to create their mental wonders, and complementary statements may also be generated copiously by psychologists and other pseudoscientific exegetes.¹ Now, however, rather than Bacchus-Dionysus, the reigning tutelary god of artistic creativity is often called “Automatism,” even (pure) “Chance.”

Even though no one seems seriously bothered by this apparent fact, this hazardous factor seems literally to put the future of art at risk. No matter, never mind; *chaqu'un a son goût*. Also presently at risk is the notion of *individual* inspiration, hence even “Inspiration” itself. And this is because, willingly or not, we now collectively live in an age that chooses to call itself “*post-modernist*.” As everyone should already know by now, the PoMo condition is, and in quantifiable fact, a psychic situation of considerable interest to any number of contemporary art critics and theorists, and they usually do not hesitate one nano-second in diversely publishing their own, often aggrieved, perceptions.² For our purposes, however, we need only briefly deal with these polemics such as they touch upon the matter of “Inspiration,” an issue which, as dealt with here as an evolving historical phenomenon, had always presupposed privileged, or “initiated,” *individual* reception.

The validity of uniquely experienced “inspiration” had, of course, been questioned by other modernists some time before they, in turn,

¹ For the artists' accounts (mostly writers), see Ghiselin, *Creative Process*; Harding, *Anatomy of Inspiration*; for examples of the lay-person explanations, see Rothenberg, *Creativity Question*.

² See, for instance, various important critical essays dealing with the fine arts assembled in Cahoon, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*; Risatti, *Postmodern Perspectives*; Smagula, *Re-Visions*; Stiles, *Theories and Documents*; Tono Martínez, *La Polémica de la Posmodernidad*; for an amusing, but somewhat depressed overall view, see Anderson, *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be*; Phake-Potter, *Postmodernist Deconstruction for Dummies*.

invented our *post*-modernist condition. Back in 1958, in his *Philosophie der Kunstgeschichte*, Arnold Hauser had observed that

The romantic character of the psychoanalytical theory of art is most clearly revealed by the prominent part assigned to the irrational and intuitive faculties in artistic creativity. These powers—described in turn as *inspiration*, intuition, in-born talent, divine grace, or the hidden sources of the unconscious—are, in fact, nothing but the romantic's compensation for forfeited reality and a disturbed or spoiled relationship with his audience. The opponents of romanticism deny, above all, the influence of these powers, and, in their definition of artistic genius, they replace *inspiration* by skill and discrimination. . . .

The idea that art originates in illness, physical deficiency, or nervous delicacy, is equally romantic in character. So is the assumption that the sources of artistic creativity are to be found in the depth of the mind, in that dark, mysterious, inscrutable region, that unaccountable spontaneity, which the artist seems to share [at least in modern creation-myths] with the primitive and the child. . . . The romantic and neurotic frame of mind as a predominant mood dates from a time when literature ceased to be a source of practical guidance and the visual arts a public concern. Then the artist had no longer anything "useful" to offer his contemporaries, and lost, along with his functions, his footing in society.

His sense of "usefulness" resulted in a feeling of exaggerated self-esteem, a deliberate striving for originality, inordinate subjectivism, and an excess of narcissistic claims. . . . Striving for originality, extravagant self-esteem [so producing the "Artist-Priest-Prophet" posture], and subjectivism are, from a sociological point of view, nothing but weapons in a competitive struggle between individual writers and artists who have lost their old patrons and begin to feel the risks connected with an unprotected market.³

Broadly viewed, typically the postmodernist *mentalité* adamantly stands, according to William Dunning, a writer recently attempting to analyze objectively the art-historical phenomenon, "opposed to the unique individual voice to which [orthodox] modernists aspired." Like (however) the Symbolists, who certainly did champion that "unique individual voice," the postmodernists do live in a culture of "signs," but they take their world to be one "embedded in an overall linguistic structure." Particularly this linguistic notion represents, Dunning observes, "the foundation for all current academic methods of discursive inquiry, including poststructuralism, deconstruction, revisionism, and semiotics." In the broader view, however, the *post*-modernist position typically

³ Hauser, *Philosophy of Art History*, 59–62.

announces itself to be *against* (or “post”) certain basic tenets of an *orthodox*-modernist position, and that posture, of course, mainly rested upon the venerable notion of individual “inspiration.”

The orthodox-modernist party-line, against which particularly the post-modernists do take their collective theoretical umbrage, has been effectively summarized by Dunning as follows:

Modernists [of the Orthodox stripe] perceived artists as *geniuses*—self-contained, entirely unique personalities who were the sole authors of their work. The emotions they expressed were presumed to be their own personal and unique emotions, and *their products were considered to be the expressions of the individual “self.”* In [the Symbolist painter] Gauguin’s words: “The turning point of the times, in art is a mad search for individualism.” . . . [Orthodox] modernists spoke of artists as *Creators*, granting them preternatural powers. Gauguin himself had said he was not satisfied with being a mere innovator; he demanded the adulation due a Creator-God.

The [orthodox] modern cult of the individual considered each work the product of one artist alone, in no way related to the work of other artists. Emotions and the method of expressing them were obliged to be unique. . . . The modern cult of the individual constructed an audience that struggled to understand art through the act of reconstructing the artist’s emotions, imagination, and experience. Viewers can, of course, achieve such a reconstruction only piecemeal and incompletely, for such a construct treats the artist as transcendent genius, far too mysterious for the simple grasp of a mortal viewer. . . .

The postmodern interest in linguistics hastened the waning of the solipsistic, indivisible, unique self, and thus it sounds the death knell of the cult of individual *genius*. Every individual inquirer is henceforth understood to be governed by the communal standard supplied by logic, and expressed in a system of public signs, so that, in the long run, convergence of opinion is accomplished. . . .

Moderate postmodernists hold that there *once* was such a thing as a unique individual, but it no longer exists in our age of corporate capitalism. More radical postmodernists maintain that the unique individual was never anything more than a myth. They contend it *never* existed, that the construct of the individual self was merely a philosophical and cultural mystification intended to persuade people that they were unique individuals. In either case, postmodernists contend that ideas and language belong to no one: the very concept of ownership depends upon either an obsolete or a mythical concept of the self.⁴

⁴ Dunning, *The Roots of Postmodernism*, v, viii, 109–10, 163, 195. For the “semiotic” issue in particular, see Bal and Bryson, “Semiotics and Art History.”

As we saw previously, for centuries there had been a certain human “type” most frequently associated with “Inspiration,” namely the “Genius.”⁵ According to that now-obsolescent conventional wisdom, without a healthy dollop of inherent *Genius*, you were not likely to be meaningfully visited by *Inspiration*. And, as we also know (or, at least, so we *were* told), without any significant whiff of “Inspiration,” how can you ever achieve the status of a Creator-God and, lacking that divine persona, how can even your most untiring efforts ever lead to Great Art?

Things have changed, however, in the postmodernist era; instead of the towering Genius, as a collective cultural icon now instead we have the lionized *Celebrity*.⁶ Today, all truly successful (versus merely marginally appreciated) vanguard artists are “celebrities” and, if not by Pablo Picasso, then that art-historical trend was set in concrete by Andy Warhol. The obvious difference between our age and that of Michelangelo is the invention and ubiquity of *the mass-media*. That commercialized, also considerably industrialized, enterprise is what presently provides for successful operators in the postmodernist vanguard the equivalent of *la Fama* in Renaissance terms. If you enjoy no media celebration, you are then reckoned a creative non-entity. Not only is your chosen *maniera* unlikely ever to be treated to significant *mimesis*, worse, you are unlikely to be nominated for the art-historical hall of fame: enshrinement in the undergraduate textbook.

A Postmodernist Update on the “Divinity” of Michelangelo’s Masterpieces

Now, in order to bring closure to these diverse observations in a neatly circular manner, let us see if we can actually “illustrate” Dunning’s précis of the postmodernist situation with a topical, contemporary and *post-modernist*, artwork. Somewhat ironically, we can apparently “personify” this largely theoretical situation, and just as we initially did with Michelangelo’s *Drunken Bacchus* (see **fig. 1**),

⁵ For the historical evolution and significance of this stock figure, see again Zilsel, *Geniebegriff*.

⁶ For the modern visual “celebrity” as representing “the human pseudo-event,” see Boorstin, *The Image*, 44–76, 154–61 (“Star”); Ewen, *All-Consuming Images*, 91–101, 155–56 (Ewen’s excellent analysis deserves a new subtitle: “A Primer of Post-modernism”).

by reference to a quintessential PoMo pictorial diatribe. In this instance, we can find one directed right at none other than Michelangelo himself.

In this case, the artist chosen to represent unilaterally a new, specifically “anti-Michelangelo,” *Zeitgeist* is Barbara Kruger (born 1945). Appropriately, the professional formation of this *celebrity-artiste* was within the explicitly capitalist-consumerist art-world of high fashion and commercial design; appropriately, Kruger began her career in the mass-media, as a graphic artist at *Harper's Bazaar* and *Mademoiselle*. Certainly, Kruger is thoroughly familiar with the didactic employment of graphic imagery considered as densely compact, rhetorical iconographic instruments and, specifically, she conspicuously combines provocative texts with mass-media photography. Like a living paradigm of postmodernism, she demonstrates the often polemical, but wholly symbiotic, relations existing today between the stridently verbal (Theory) and the merely visual (Art).

Her thesis is rather simple, although endlessly reiterated. We postmodernists typically live and work in a “post-natural” environment, the City. Her stressed-out megalopolitan world is composed of looming buildings, hurrying employees, crowded streets, and grid-locked automobiles, all of which are organized, controlled, and manipulated by SIGNS. These ubiquitous visual markers, traffic signs and advertising signs, COMMAND us: *turn, slow down, speed up, park, buy*. Such is Kruger's not-so-surprising revelation, her polemical “thesis.” Since form follows function, she conspicuously “appropriates” (or quotes and/or pirates) the rhetorical conventions (*topoi*) belonging to a commercial-art layout, including its typically coarse, mass-media pictorial detritus. Her somewhat more subtle rhetorical sub-text is, states Dunning, Kruger's manifesto of a “conscious choice to reject her *mastering* [oops: a gender-specific verb!] of skill and technique in order to negate the traditional [OrthoMod] concept of personal quality and style identifying the skilled, or ‘genius,’ artist.”⁷

Well, if that is the general purpose of your particular postmodernist polemics, then who could be a better target than *Michelangelo*, himself notoriously famed for half a millennium as “the skilled, or ‘genius,’ artist”? (**fig. 26**) Accordingly, and as Dunning acutely observes,

⁷ Dunning, *The Roots of Postmodernism*, 251.

When Kruger reproduces a photograph of Michelangelo's "God Creating Adam" from the Sistine Chapel, and prints the polemic "*You invest in the divinity of the masterpiece*" in large letters across the middle [as in **fig. 26**], she is addressing all these concerns in an elegant and complex mix of words, image, and meaning. She is simultaneously attacking the concept of the artist's exclusive rights to an image, *the myth of the divine inspiration of the genius*, the artifact value of art (that it has value because it is old), the commodity investment value of original art as a scarce resource. She is also exposing the history of art as a masculine legacy—a tradition handed down from fathers to sons.⁸

No matter; never mind. Whether or not postmodernists—either "we" or "them"—presently do actually accept the validity of individually privileged moments testifying to "the myth of the divine inspiration of the genius," unquestionably the idea was once made widely available to many aspiring "geniuses." And, yes, Michelangelo was certainly one of *them*. In fact, and as even the postmodernists must admit, his kind of *genius*—which was the kind directly postulated upon *inspiration* (even if his was never "automatic")—does represent the major sub-text propelling the more radical *orthodox*-modernist artistic experiments that made twentieth-century art so unique.

Late Modernist Neo-Primitivism and Regressive Art Education

We began this study by suggesting that, given its useful role as an epitome of certain tendencies inherent in avant-garde expression of the "heroic" modern period inhabited by the Expressionists and Cubists, the neo-Dionysiac principle of dynamic "self-expression" needed to be re-invented. No matter; as we discovered, it had already been given opportune birth by the Symbolists, impassioned advocates writing shortly before the birth of the twentieth century and its distinctive modernist artistic expression. Thereafter, what particularly epitomizes the neo-Dionysiac principle of dynamic "self-expression" throughout the twentieth century is a larger, rather amorphous, idea that we may call the ethos of "neo-primitivism."⁹

⁸ Ibid., 256; emphasis mine; on this particular image, see also Linker, *Love for Sale*, 79.

⁹ For a searching enquiry into this modernist phenomenon, also exhuming its ancient roots, see Moffitt, *Occultism and Avant-Garde Art*, especially chapters 3, 4.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the idea of “primitivism” represents “adherence to or practise of that which is *primitive*,” and that term, in turn, embraces notions of all that which is emblematically taken to be expressive of “the first age, period or stage,” thus, by extension, all that which is “the earliest [*primus*], *original*.” Being “primary, as opposed to secondary,” it likewise represents all that is “original, [as] opposed to secondary.” We have already seen many references made by modernist writers and artists to the desirable primitivist condition. Since the legendary *Urzeit* obviously had no precedents of any sort, accordingly all of its products, whether material or merely mental, were inherently, naturally and inevitably, wholly “original.” Initially, the totality of a still-current polemic seems summed up by Nietzsche’s reference to “the Dionysiac artist [who] has identified himself with the primal unity”; in fact, as he added, “Genius coalesces with this primordial artist [*Ur-Künstler*].”

As seems unfortunately rarely acknowledged, this commonplace equation—“primitivist = original”—has evermore become wrapped up in official art-educational politics (a problem already alluded to in chapter 1). In short, with its rigid rules and set limits to human freedom, the unbearably lengthy Cold War period was itself made ripe for another eruption of “primitivist art,” an extreme form of self-expression acknowledged to operate with neither rigid rules nor set limits. Among other kinds of post-formalist expression, and even though lacking intrinsic procedural authority, “performance art” was, of course, sanctioned by the weight of art-historical authority. According to scholarly scripture, it *was* a perfectly legitimate and established, quintessentially “modern,” medium: its recognized spiritual founders were the Futurists and Dada dissidents. The critical impasse, impelling both *postmodernism* and *neoprimitivism*, and also coinciding with the great outbreak of performance art around 1970, was vividly, even passionately, described in a widely read article by Kim Levin:

It was as if history was grinding to a halt. Its innovations were [now] disguised as revivals. The question of imitations, the gestural look of Abstract Expressionism, and all the words that had been hurled as insults for as long as we could remember—“illusionistic,” “theatrical,” “decorative,” “literary”—were resurrected, as [burgeoning *post-modernist*] art became once again ornamental or moral, grandiose or miniaturized, anthropological, archeological, ecological, autobiographical or fictional. It was defying all the proscriptions of [orthodox] modernist purity.

The mainstream trickled on, minimalizing and conceptualizing itself into oblivion, but we were finally *bored* with all that artistic purity. . . .

Modernity had gone out of style. It even seemed as if style itself had been used up, but then Style—that invention of [recognizable] sets of forms—was a preoccupation of modernism, as was Originality.

The [visual] styles of modernism have now become a vocabulary of ornament, a grammar of available forms, along with the rest of the past. Style had become a voluntary option, to be scavenged and recycled, to be quoted, paraphrased, parodied—to be used as a language. . . . By the 1960s, with Pop art embracing the processes and products of mass production and Minimalism espousing the materials and methods of industry, the ultimate decade of technology had arrived. . . . But at the height of this optimism, Modernism fell apart. . . .

Modernism, toward the end of its reign, came to be seen as reductive and austere. Its purity came to seem puritanical. . . . Formalism implied not only the logical structures of modernist invention but also the strictures of rigid adherence to established forms. . . . In practice it was elitist: the public never “understood” abstract art. It was as specialized as modern science. . . . Like capitalism, it was materialistic. . . . What had started as radical physicality turned into another commodity.

In this way, Levin has deftly established the psychological framework, the essential *emotional* needs, that caused the second great wave of modernist neoprimitivism, a seemingly unlikely chronological counterpoint to the ironies of postmodernism. In the 1970s this *nouvelle vague* became a welling current, a big splash, one upon whose foaming crest rode the triumphant figure of Joseph Beuys (**figs. 24, 25**). Beuys was an eccentric who appeared to conform wonderfully to the new prescriptions—and he was one who had done so since the early 1960s! As Levin then puts it (without, however, referring either to Beuys in particular or to performance art in general),

In diverse and unexpected ways, Art was going back to Nature. But having been absent so long, nature was unrecognizable. At the beginning, it looked like demolition. But the post-minimalist movements—statements against formal purity that were modernist reductions as well—were not just an issue of withholding goods from the marketplace, an embargo on the object. Whether resuming materials to their natural state, subjecting them to natural force, sending art back to the land or internalizing it within the body, they were evidence that time and/or place were becoming crucial, clearing the way for the psychological and the narrational, for personal content, lifelike contexts and subjective facts.

Post-Modernism mimics life, accepts awkwardness and crudity, takes an amateur stance; it uses memory, research, confession, fiction. Subjective and intimate, it blurs the boundaries between the world and the self. It is about identity and behavior, bringing art back to nature and into the world, assuming all the moral responsibilities of life. [It is] based

not on scientific reason and logic, and the pretense of objectivity, but on presence, subjective experience, behavior, on a weird kind of therapeutic revelation in which it is not necessary to believe or understand. It is enough if it works.¹⁰

The products associated with this “therapeutic” neoprimitivist phenomenon are many and quite varied, but ultimately all these are linked to what Kim Levin called that anomalous “return to Nature.” As we have been taught, this essentially *un-natural* regression is actively characterized by artists either “resuming materials to their natural state, subjecting them to natural force, sending art back to the land, or internalizing it within the body.” When we survey the specific manifestations of a now-ubiquitous “therapeutic neoprimitivism” we can better understand the apparent inevitability of the “artist-shaman” stance characterizing (among many others) Beuys.

This new primitivism, unlike the first primitivism that inspired so much innovative abstraction at the beginning of the twentieth century, is bookish rather than motif-oriented, idea-derived rather than visually centered.¹¹ It is more art historical (literally) than outraged or even rebellious. As we should know (at least since the initial publication of Robert Goldwater’s pioneering study on *Primitivism in Modern Painting* in 1938), after around 1907 the early Cubists and Expressionists had become collectively fascinated by *l’art nègre*. This then became their new, essentially external, source of “artistic inspiration.” These mostly African tribal artifacts were literally perceived as being “exotic,” and even in the literal sense of the Greek adjective *exotikós*, “outside.” Moreover, and since the Romantic era, vanguard artists had also commonly perceived themselves as “outsiders,” *les aliénés*. As “exotic” objects, the plundered loot created by European colonialism seemed to offer similarly “alienated”—but otherwise non-exotic—Europeans a viable, wholly visual, ready-made, artistic-stylistic alternative to those prevailing European traditional aesthetic tenets producing the polished but contemptible artifacts of the contemporary art salons.

¹⁰ Levin, “Farewell to Modernism,” rpt. in Hertz, *Theories of Contemporary Art*, 1–9.

¹¹ For this phenomenon (but only treated as a modernist phenomenon), see the fundamental critical anthology: Rubin, “*Primitivism*”; other useful studies include Connelly, *Sleep of Reason*; González Alcantud, *El exotismo en las vanguardias artístico-literarias*; Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*; Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art*; Root, *Cannibal Culture*; Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*.

Once European avant-garde cultural values were attached to the non-European tribal models, with those mostly coming from European colonies anyway, these vanguard translations of “exotic” art forms would then tend to be of a generalized, and anthropologically incorrect, sort. For instance, “simple” and “sincere” were the favored adjectives at the time; these were the tags to be applied to “primitive” materials worked by praiseworthy “primitive” techniques. Another cultural value was therefore implicit: tribal art was diametrically opposed to the prevailing aesthetic canons of European art, sophisticated cultural values already put under sharp attack by the Symbolist movement. In the event, it was “the look” of European neoprimitivism that really counted—and that look betrayed a culturally hostile, “outsider” attitude. In a narrowly visual sense, “tribal” (which was to say largely African) art conveyed important stylistic-conceptual ideas by 1910. Nonetheless, these were notions already commonly employed by radical European artists by that time. The strictly visual repercussion embraced an ethic of rawness (or *non finito*); geometricity and ideographicity; unaffected truth through simple materials; spontaneity, and an emphasis on extremes of combinatory invention. These traits became the conventions of European vanguard art.

In this case, however, more important was what was *lacking*: as far as we know, none of the early modernist artists employing such non-traditional ethnographic materials knew *anything* specific about either ethnography or anthropology. In short, the ideas initially generating the forms they (more or less) copied largely remained a mystery to them, that is, wholly “foreign.” The purport of the individual tribal artifact’s subject matter did not, as it were, enter into the picture. A comment by Emil Nolde may be taken as representative of his generation: “Why is it that we artists love to see the unsophisticated artifacts of the Primitives? . . . What we enjoy, probably, is the intense and often grotesque expression of energy, of life.”¹² As Goldwater concluded, in early modernist primitivism, “for the first time the products of a native culture were being considered as isolated objects, entirely apart from the context of their creation.”¹³ Until very recently, as William Rubin affirmed, “Few modern artists have been readers of ethnographical books.”¹⁴

¹² Nolde, as cited in Rubin, “*Primitivism*,” 383.

¹³ Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, 87.

¹⁴ Rubin, “*Primitivism*,” 78.

All this has now drastically changed, thus explaining the fundamental distances between the first and the latest fashionable primitivisms in avant-garde art. The new situation is cogently explained by Kirk Varnedoe:

Central to these changes [in primitivist perceptions] has been a new kind of artist and an expanded idea of modern art. In the sixties, a new generation of predominantly *middle-class, college-trained, artists, sophisticated and self-conscious in art-historical awareness*, began producing unorthodox work that rejected many of the premises of earlier [or orthodox] modernism. In one sense, the intention of these [post-modernist] artists was to make art that was newly shocking and difficult to accept, thereby reviving the avant-garde combativeness they felt had been smothered by the broad acceptance of abstract painting in the 1950s. Nevertheless, much of the rhetoric of the day spoke of closing, rather than widening, the gap between art and its public.¹⁵

To complement Varnedoe's trenchant observations, Robert Hughes touches upon the current state of unquestionably modish primitivism by setting the present crisis in a wider, socio-economical, context. This is the one specifically pertaining to contemporary art education. In short: "35,000 painters, sculptors, potters, art historians and so forth graduate from the art schools of America every year. This means that every two years, this culture produces as many art-related professionals as there were people in Florence at the end of the Quattrocento."¹⁶ Viewed historically, "In the sixties there was a glut of students, and in the seventies a glut of teachers, since the art-education system had, in effect, created a proletariat of artists, a pool of unemployable talent for which society could find no use—except as trainers of more pupils."¹⁷ Imagine that!

Paradoxically, the American university—itself unquestionably a heavily bureaucratized "institution"—has ironically become (*faute de mieux*) the major incubator of ostensibly anti-establishment "vanguard" art, especially so in our plentiful national boondocks, our provincial outback, the one locked twixt "sea to shining sea." Urban or provincial, the American university, perhaps by default, becomes the major supplier of, tutor to, and implicit accomplice behind thronging, the-

¹⁵ Varnedoe, "Contemporary Explorations," in Rubin, "*Primitivism*," 661–84 (p. 661; emphasis mine).

¹⁶ Hughes, *Nothing If Not Critical*, 401.

¹⁷ Hughes, *Shock of the New*, 402.

oretically challenged, advanced postmodernist artists designed to inhabit the utopian future. Just in the arena of vanguard art production, with this including much neoprimitivism, the American university is unquestionably prolific. According to the official figures, during the high-roller Reagan era some over *thirty-thousand* art students *annually* graduated with a diploma, Bachelor of Fine Art, Master of Fine Art, and so forth. More recent figures (1994) show some 170 American art schools and universities mutually producing, each year, more than one thousand MFAs alone, with that certificate taken to represent the academic “terminal degree.” As such, that is, as a “terminal” case, the MFA is now taken to be “equivalent” to the more rigorous Ph.D. granted in pursuit of considerably less “creative” endeavors (including “Kunstgeschichte”).

Those artful degrees, the BFA and MFA, are institutional certificates conventionally signifying attainment of at least rudimentary levels of accomplishment (however arbitrarily designated by the faculty) in such academic disciplines as “creative” painting, sculpture, pottery, jewelry making, photography, video, performance art, and so forth. But these “academic disciplines” all seem vocationally redundant and their proud bearers seem, therefore, tenaciously unemployable. Educated guesswork by the more skeptical academics has it that presently (perhaps) 98.5 percent of our artistic alumni trained in “creative” (versus “commercial”) art are not presently employed in, or certainly not adequately compensated for, any exercise of their expensively acquired “skills.” Intrigued, I myself began to look up, and then question, some art school graduates some ten years or so after their ejection from the academic *crèche* into the real world. The result was that *none* ever told me that making their “art” had ever supported them financially. In fact, nearly all told me that, in fact, they just “don’t do that anymore,” that is, no more artmaking. Consequently, such expensive training does not even serve hobby purposes; if not even that, then it appears to serve no constructive purpose whatsoever. Still, contemporary American life does *demand* that all middle-class, twenty-somethings expend four or more years laboriously getting themselves *some* kind of “college degree,” however pointless that certificate ultimately turns out to be as an economic survival tool.

Committed by traditions dating at least to the 1960s, American art schools pledge themselves to inculcating socially irrelevant myths of “creativity” and “self-expression.” Historically viewed, obviously all such notions owe their status to the unprecedented Renaissance

exaltation of individual *Inspiration*. Those self-propagating, largely tax-funded, pedagogical training schools of the future American avant-garde provide reams of sheepskin certificates to hand out to their mostly compliant clientele. Ostensibly certifying creative prowess, what they really document is an extended immersion by naive youths in entrenched creation-myths of self-expressive and self-absorbed, typically otherworldly, theoretical license. The students have been preached a creative license historically no *earlier* art had either enjoyed—nor even remotely envisioned. Despairing of ever reaching those mythical “masses” with their “advanced art,” the troop of artistic evangelists inhabiting Academia in America betrays a ghetto mentality, unique even within known parameters of recognized neurotic syndromes traditionally characterizing the American, white-bourgeois, professional classes.

Hughes also tells us precisely “what went wrong with the education provided by many an American art school,” namely, little or no art *training*, at least not in the sense operable since the invention of art schools during the Renaissance. Back then, *Inspiration* was postulated upon sound technical preparation, a universally recognized artisan curriculum fulfilling recognized social *needs*; only after you had laboriously acquired marketable capabilities and skills could you then boast of your occasional visitations by *Inspiration*. There was—once—a time when considerable time and effort was seriously dedicated to learning mutually agreed upon, and teachable, essential *skills*. No more. In fact, even the great early modern artists, and they were unquestionable pioneers, were exposed to traditional educational norms then characterizing their profession. Without their acquired skills—and however they eventually chose systematically to *discard* them—there would have been no significant “modern” art. As Hughes reminds us,

With scarcely an exception, every significant artist of the last hundred years, from Seurat to Matisse, from Picasso to Mondrian, from Beckmann to de Kooning, was drilled (or drilled himself) in “academic” *drawing*. The long tussle with the unforgiving and real motif proved in the end to be the only basis on which the great formal achievements of modernism could be raised. Only in this way was the right to radical distortion within a continuous tradition earned, and its results raised above the level of improvisory play. This kind of rigor had been leached out of American art schools by the 1970s [and] skill was jettisoned in the interest of some fiction of “rawness” or “primitive” intensity. . . . At no time since 1900 has the ground been so crusted with academic

art—except that the academicism is not that of Cabanel or Bouguereau or Meissonier: it is instead the *academicism* of the spray can and the pat gesture of deep “expressive” involvement that only signifies routine picture-making, the academicism not of a depleted ideology but of a trivalized plurality.¹⁸

Although capable of infinite verbal expansion, the basic, coast-to-coast, art department party-line justifying this absence of vocational competence and rigor can be—even today—compressed into a famous oracular pronouncement rendered by Clement Greenberg way back in 1962. In a widely cited essay called “After Abstract Expressionism,”¹⁹ he then wondered “what irreducibly constitutes *good* art as such.” Then as now, your guess was probably wrong; according to Greenberg, “the worked out answer appears to be: *not skill, training, or anything else having to do with execution or performance*, but conception alone.” As we saw (in Chapter 1), Greenberg was really just touting *Inspiration*. And that is precisely what most art students acquire at the end of the millennium: “conception” alone, the surrogate term for “Inspiration,” now bundled in heaps of “theory” and rarely accompanied by any hint of “skill, training, or anything else having to do with execution.” And here is how you can immediately judge the actual results, and as they directly affect *you*. Just ask yourself this simple question: “When was the last time I saw a recently executed example of avant-garde high art that gave *me* either profound (versus merely facile) intellectual insight or, conversely, intense sensual pleasure?” (Well . . .?)

As employed in that usage, “conception” was perhaps then a novel term, so to clarify contextually its more familiar connotations, we learned from Greenberg that “conception can also be called invention, *inspiration*.” Ah, there is the key term, the one that we have already pursued to its historical root-cellar: mindless Dionysiac “enthusiasm,” a kind of group-induced *dementia*, literally a “de-braining.” Certainly, it was also a very important term for Greenberg: “*Inspiration* alone belongs altogether to the individual; everything else, including skill, can now be acquired by any one.” But, as one now questions, where can one *find* those skills supposedly available to be “acquired by any one?” No one seems to know: no matter; never mind. According to Greenberg’s authoritative assertion, “Inspiration remains the

¹⁸ Hughes, *Nothing If Not Critical*, 306–7, 402.

¹⁹ Reprinted in Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory*, 766–69.

only factor in the creation of a successful work of art that cannot be copied or imitated. . . . The *exact* choices of color, medium, size, shape, proportion—including the size and shape of the support—are what alone determine the quality of the result, and these choices depend solely on inspiration or conception.”

Much the same thing (that is, “orthodox modernism”) was said in 1953 by Jacques Maritain, but he was mainly referring to poetry, and he called *inspiration* “creative intuition.” Whatever you name it, by 1953 it was a commonplace that “in creative intuition [inspiration] we have the primary rule to which, in the case of the fine arts, the whole fidelity, obedience, and heedfulness of the artist must be committed. . . . All other rules are of the earth. . . . If creative intuition is lacking, a work can be perfectly made, and it is nothing; the artist has nothing to say. . . . So the unique rule of the perfect artist is finally: ‘Cling to your creative intuition [inspiration], and do what you want.’” Inspiration strikes us, says Maritain (and a battalion of other aesthetes), when “we are aware of a rare presence, a pure creative force, or an untrammelled spirit.”²⁰ Well, all those manifestations of “pure creative force” and “untrammelled spirit” are now become standard staples of teaching and instruction in what now passes for humanistic study, especially the hands-on kind of instruction promoting the “Fine Arts.”

What presently passes for an art school education in America seems mostly manacled by dogmas of laissez-faire subjectivism inevitable to the dogmatic propagation of preferably “unique” creativity and inherently untrammelled “self-expression.” In America—as nowhere else—there additionally reigns the pseudo-democratic belief that it is just not “fair” to discourage anybody with any scintilla of potential “talent.” That “anybody” now potentially means everybody, even Europeans, even the downtrodden inhabitants of the Third World: “*Jeder Mensch ist ein Künstler*,” according to Beuys, certainly not an American pedagogue. The result is that what the university faculty usually does not, will not do is provide (or “burden”) the student with useful mechanical skills of a kind once routinely acquired by even the most thickheaded Renaissance apprentice.²¹ Instead of mere

²⁰ Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, 45.

²¹ For the way it used to be done, see Pevsner, *Academies of Art*. (A professional aside: having tried both venues, I can affirm that, for either men or women, it is far more demanding and difficult to make the rank of buck-sergeant (E-5) in the US Army than it is to “earn” a BFA or MFA. And only one of the two options

manual dexterity, typically the postmodernist academic machine provides “verbal skills,” mainly expressing self-referential, and probably mostly meretricious, art *theory*.

Further evidence for Mr. Greenberg’s clairvoyant talents may be seen in an oracular acknowledgment put into his 1939 essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”; in short, “*All that is academic is kitsch.*”²² According to Greenberg, said academic-modernist “kitsch would be impossible without the availability close at hand of a fully matured cultural tradition.” Just as happens in today’s wholly academic avant-garde art routines, “Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times.” In short, and as was obvious even in 1939, “where there is an avant-garde, generally we also find a rearguard,” an *arrière-garde*. That is where you would have found, just as you will find today, “the expression mattering more than what is being expressed, [so showing] that avant-garde culture is the imitation of imitating.” Indeed, and just as Beuys recognized, the Academy can really use a strong dose of “enchantment.”

Accordingly, particularly proscribed by established PoMo art academicians are even moderately demanding, and so “elitist,” tests put to aspiring art students to demonstrate any quantifiable measure of technical prowess. Besides a surfeit of tendentious theoretical “kitsch,” one obvious result (*faute de pire*) is draftsmanship, of which we currently see exhibited scarcely any commendable examples. Moreover, although there is necessarily much talk in universities about artistic “freedom,” no one seems to know just what *that* mythic noun signifies. However, according to a definition given to me long ago, real “freedom is embodied in the reasoned choice between two or more *known* alternatives.” Obviously, if you don’t *know*, if you haven’t really *learned* anything, then you are deprived of any *choice*; in short, you are denied *freedom* itself. In this case, referring to the real-world future of the art student, clearly ignorance is slavery, in this case to either (besides predictable unemployment) momentarily fashionable theoretical conventions or to the latest stylistic trend, both probably being equal in ultimate art-historical non-value.

assures gainful (i.e. paid) employment. Since only scholars scrutinize end-notes, this revelation will happily escape notice of employment-challenged art-school grads.)

²² Reprinted in Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory*, 530–41.

Whatever its supposed content—"conception" or initial *inspiration*—any art work executed today by any artist physically incapable of reproducing a battery of so-called "academic" techniques will—inevitably—end up looking (*faute de mieux*) "primitive." Given a paucity of standard, but necessarily learned and repeatedly practiced, formal skills—which one *does* have the option ("freedom") to discard after having laboriously acquired these—the contemporary neo-primitivist appearance is not a matter of choice, rather the *only* choice. Needless to say, as initially adopted by various European artists over a century ago, the primitivist mode—and the defiant revolutionary mentality that naturally went with it—was then a matter of reasoned *choice*. Then it was a deliberately thought-out, then visually fashioned, expression of genuine "artistic freedom."

It has not always been so. Even advanced twentieth-century art theory and art practise had not always been quite so complacent in its teaching—nor quite so forgiving of vocational incompetence in its alumni. There was a time when orthodox-modernist "inspiration" was not so lionized. Long ago, Walter Gropius, in his manifesto on the *Idee und Aufbau des Staatlichen Bauhaus Weimar* ("Concept and Construction of the Bauhaus Municipal School in Weimar," 1923), observed how:

Academic training has brought about the development of a great art-proletariat destined to social misery. For this art-proletariat, lulled into a dream of "genius" and enmeshed in artistic conceit, was being prepared for the "profession" of architecture, painting, sculpture or graphic art—but without being given the equipment of a real education, which alone could have assured it of economic and aesthetic independence. Its abilities, in the final analysis, were confined to a sort of drawing-painting that had no relation to the realities of materials, techniques or economics. Lack of all vital connection with the life of the community led inevitably to barren aesthetic speculation.

The fundamental pedagogic mistake of the art academy [then as presently] arose from its preoccupation with the idea of individual ["inspired"] *genius* and its discounting the value of commendable achievement on a less exalted level [and so] the great mass of these individuals, fed upon false hopes and trained as one-sided academicians, was condemned to a life of fruitless artistic activity. Unequipped to function successfully in the struggle for existence, they found themselves numbered among the social drones: useless, by virtue of their [vocationally irrelevant] schooling.²³

²³ Gropius, in *ibid.*, 339–40.

With reference to most diploma-granting “art schools” operating in America today, that point about educational omissions appears just as valid, and just as provocative, as it was when originally pronounced by Gropius over eight decades ago. In short, obviously post-modernist art has been decisively shaped by its art education—or lack thereof. But this “dumbing down” is becoming characteristic of *all* postmodernist “higher” education.²⁴ In short, “Inspiration” by itself—meaning without intelligent preparation, without applicable skills, and without plain hard work—likely never produced any art-work of enduring value.

Kirk Varnedoe had also specified the strictly material differences between the old (ca. 1910) and new, post-modernist, primitivisms practiced by all those (probably unemployable) “predominantly middle-class, college-trained, artists, sophisticated and self-conscious in art-historical awareness.” As he ruefully viewed the situation, “This changed notion of modern art in turn encountered an altered picture of the Primitive. In the sixties and seventies, the *paperback* bookstore—rather than the curio shop, the gallery, or the ethnological museum—became the prime locus of many artists’ contact with tribal cultures.” The results: “All this has yielded a primitivism that declares itself, for better or worse, more knowing, and, in the process, begs the question whether its frequently bookish results are more truly radical or authentic than the allegedly ‘merely formal’ incorporations of tribal art by early modernists, such as Picasso.”²⁵

So viewed, the very ambitious range of this neoprimitivism is understandably immense, given that it is: (1) mostly bourgeois; (2) college-trained; (3) art-historically self-conscious; (4) paperback-derived; and (5) the product of a glut of young artists eager to establish the quick (“bubble”) professional reputation. One way or the other, it is all currently postulated upon “self-expression,” and that notion in turn rests upon the historical bedrock of the *Inspiration* propagated by Renaissance art theory. In fact, the postmodernist neoprimitivist range is so wide as to constitute a mixed bag of anthropological and/or ethnographical tricks. And, to our other contemporary contexts, we must, of course, also add the still burning, rhetorical “big

²⁴ For abundant eye-witness evidence, see Sacks, *Generation-X Goes to College*; for the larger cultural context in America, see also Fussell, *BAD or, The Dumbing of America*.

²⁵ Varnedoe, in Rubin, “Primitivism,” 662.

issues” of our postmodernist culture: international terrorism, ecological degradation, protests against government waste and land management, feminism, nuclear disarmament, the imperiled nuclear family, gender (confusion), urban decay, overcrowding and savage unrest, civil rights and social activism in general, irrationalism and occultism, and plain old romanticism. As for the last, Lucy Lippard has probably best summed it all up:

The simplest explanation for contemporary artists’ current [primitivist] attraction to ancient images, artifacts, and sites is *nostalgia*—not only for those periods we now [naively] imagine offered a social life simpler and more meaningful than our own, but also for any time when what people made—art—had a secure place in their daily lives.²⁶

As Thomas McEvelley adds, these are the “expressions of the desire, so widespread in the ’60s and early ’70s, to reconstitute within Modern civilization something like an ancient or primitive sensibility of oneness with nature.” Moreover, the artists eagerly participating in this widespread desire “have fallen into two groups: those that select from the neolithic sensibility of fertility and blood sacrifice, and those that select from the paleolithic sensibility of shamanic magic and ordeal.”²⁷ The quintessential neoprimitivist example of Joseph Beuys (**figs. 24, 25**) is especially illuminating: he combined *both* alternatives, and both may be aptly called “neo-Dionsysiac” phenomena. Again, the ultimate excuse is “Inspiration,” which figuratively means that you need never repent for your presumably well-intended, creative *gaucheries*.

“Inspiration”: Old Stereotypes, New Findings

The lay public entertains various received creation-myths. So, alas, do many widely published, and professionally well regarded, art historians. Just like their lay contemporaries, the thronging non-creative classes, typically these erudite *kunstwissenschaftliche* savants have never personally experienced genuine creative activity as practicing studio

²⁶ Lippard, *Overlay*, 4 (oddly, Lippard makes no mention of Beuys in her book).

²⁷ McEvelley, “Art in the Dark,” *Artforum*, Summer (1983); rpt. in Hertz (ed.), *Theories*, 287–305, an essay containing many other pertinent observations, some even in reference to Beuys.

artists. That hands-on lacuna can pose problems. Regarding the actual workings of “inspiration” (even today), the practicing studio artists, if they were however to think about it, should know better. That is what you would *like* to believe, just as you would also agree that it would also be helpful if aircraft designers held a pilot’s license, and that pilots driving a packed airbus should understand aerodynamic theory and other related arcane matters. But having an artist’s license (the BFA or MFA) does not automatically confer any useful insights into the real processes of artistic creativity; it additionally does not automatically guarantee any respect for serious art-historical inquiry. Fortunately, finally the licensed scientists (*Naturwissenschaftler*) have begun to seriously ponder the age-old issue of mental creation. This is fortunate since—as opposed to what is portentously but vaguely signified by “art”—real “science” deals with quantifiable data and controlled observation, with this yielding findings repeatable and obtainable by any operator conscientiously pursuing the same analytical procedures and manipulating similar laboratory materials.

According to the results of over a quarter-century of intense psychological research performed by Dr. Albert Rothenberg, Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard and Director (since 1964) of the “Studies in the Creative Process” project, the old, standardized stereotypes of artistic creativity may now be considered largely fallacious. In short, the “artist as mad genius” notion, largely a product of the Romantic era, is wholly obsolete.²⁸ Basically, Rothenberg has shown “the creative process to be a *conscious, rational process*,” and this proven observation runs absolutely (perhaps for some alarmingly), quite “*contrary to the romantic notion that creativity grows largely out of inspiration, the thinking of dreams, or some unconscious source*.”²⁹ In short, as laboriously analyzed by me in all their various historical manifestations, every venerable article of faith traditionally held regarding the creative process—including its originating “inspiration”—now proves to have been essentially unfounded! And, states Dr. Rothenberg, most prominent “among the mythical fallacies connecting mental illness with creativity is the idea of the creator’s *frenzy* and *transport* in the experience

²⁸ For a good historical account of the modern mythic construction, see Becker, *Mad Genius Controversy*; for earlier ideas, see Zilsel, *Entstehung des Geniebegriffes*; for some colorful anecdotes, see Vallejo-Nágera, *Locos egregios*; for the sanest overall view known to me regarding contemporary madness, see Friedrich, *Going Crazy*.

²⁹ Rothenberg, *Madness and Creativity*, 15 (emphasis mine).

of *inspiration*.” Then follows the shrewd observation that: “Creative people have done little to correct or disavow this emphasis. In fact, they have generally appeared hell-bent on perpetrating it and enlarging it, in their public statements at any rate.”³⁰

Let us take a closer look at how those traditional creation-myths justifying “enthusiastic” art-making are now undergoing some salutary scientific deconstruction. For Rothenberg, most representative is:

Story 1, [about] the myth of the inspired poet who writes everything out of his head in one fell swoop. It is a time-honored myth, like the myth of Athena springing from the brow of Zeus, that is cherished by professionals as well as the laity. It has been nurtured by creative people themselves. As told in the stories, such a miraculous faculty is often connected with strangeness as well as madness. Story 2, [is] about the painters, [and it] refers to the mythic idea of a very special talent—supposedly identifiable in the childhoods of all artists. Also, it includes the idea of unique special talent associated with what is called the *eidetic* faculty of being able to have perfect visual memory. There is, however, no evidence that eidetic memory, or *synaesthesia* (interchangeable sensory experience), or, for that matter, especially high intelligence has anything to do with creativity in general.

There are, however, exceptions to this—such as high intelligence in science or musical ability. The [complementary] scientist-genius story is the myth that scientific creativity consists of ideas welling up from the unconscious. Many famous scientists, such as Jules-Henri Poincaré and August Kekulé (the latter being the initiator of the famous myth of the discovery of the benzene ring in a dream) have forwarded this. *This myth is a variant on the dramatic inspiration idea. . . .* Why have these myths developed? They have, partly because it has been difficult to get good data about the relatively small number of people throughout the history of the world who have [truly] been creative geniuses, partly because these *creative geniuses have enjoyed perpetuating certain of the myths—the inspiration myth especially—for various reasons*. Primarily, it is because creativity is very, very positively valued.³¹

Rothenberg also makes an implicit clinical criticism of the ubiquitous modernist creation-myth called “Automatism”:

Closely related to the emphasis on *inspiration* is the belief in the *unconscious* creative wellspring. Invoked more frequently in connection with creativity than with almost any other human action or experience, the unconscious is considered responsible for mysterious bolts from the blue, flashes of insight, waking from sleep with ideas already formed,

³⁰ Ibid., 38.

³¹ Ibid., 3 (emphasis mine).

and energy-releasing, altered states of consciousness. . . . The belief in the unconscious roots of creativity is a mystique. Because creativity is *unconscious*, so the adherents often also say, it cannot be explained or adequately understood. . . . Nietzsche's *concept of the creative artist's Dionysian frenzy*, for example, anticipates modern constructions of unconscious influences and emphasizes an extreme irrationality of the creative mind. . . .

Such emphasis on the seemingly "possessed" aspect of creative activity has been a basis for a long tradition citing both madness and supra-human, or external sources for creativity [and] has today culminated in a psychological emphasis on the unconscious aspect of the [artistic] mind. . . . So ingrained is the idea that creativity arises from unconscious sources that investigators who present evidence for *conscious* factors do so at their peril; they run the risk of being rejected out of hand by both professionals and laity.³²

Now that all these neo-Dionysian *myths* are recognized as such (qua myths), what are the *facts*? Just as it was the task of the *psychologist* to make the creative process comprehensible as a more or less commonplace psychological mechanism, so is it the obligation of the *art historian* to make art itself understandable. One specifically does so by exhuming the *historical* conditions governing both its conceptualization and its subsequent celebration by non-artistic taste-makers. For either professional investigator, psychologist or art historian, myths impede real understanding. According to Rothenberg, "there is no specific personality type associated with outstanding creativity [and] creative people are actually not all exceptionally intelligent" (which is also my experience). As Rothenberg's close observation (mine too) reveals, to the contrary of centuries of conventional wisdom, successful artistic "creators are neither generally compulsive nor impulsive, although many—even highly outstanding ones, interestingly—are somewhat rigid, meticulous, and perfectionists, rather than free and spontaneous." Similarly, the better historians are likewise "rigid, meticulous, and perfectionists, rather than free and spontaneous." Another significant observation made by Rothenberg (which is mine, too) announces that:

Only one characteristic of personality and orientation to [artistic] life and work is absolutely, *across the board*, present in *all* creative people: MOTIVATION.³³

³² Ibid., 49–50 (emphasis mine).

³³ Ibid., 8 (his emphasis).

Since art students (according to my observations, and over some decades) are especially susceptible to these received modernist creation-myths—particularly the “neoprimitivist” and “automatist” kind celebrating intellectual passivity and *alla prima*, unplanned and incorrigible, idle gesticulations—this point needs emphatic reiteration. As Rothenberg observes (and so do I), genuinely “creative people are extraordinarily highly motivated [and] the creative process always results from direct, intense, and *intentional* effort on the creator’s part.” In short, but as seems so often overlooked in current art-school curricula, “Painstaking *work* is involved, in both the beforehand preparation and the elaboration after.” (Alas, *work* seems since to have become just another “four-letter” word.) Another obvious point, alas, so often overlooked today, is: “Creative people are *professionals*, just like any other professionals. *They have undergone training and learning*—virtually all go to college.”³⁴ (Nonetheless, it can happen that even “college” may typically only aggravate the problem by further ingraining or actually instilling reigning cultural myths and stereotypes.) The reasoned view is presently that, overall,

The popular image of the behavior accompanying an “inspiratory” experience is actually correct, but the popular, as well as the scholarly, conception of the actual *role* of inspiration in the creative process is incorrect. . . . Although the [inspiratory] process frequently occurs early in creative activity, and is usually accompanied by a sense of surprise and illumination, there are generally no dramatic effects. . . . Much evidence exists indicating that inspiratory experiences have been an exception rather than a rule. Careful study [of literary creation], from first manuscript drafts to final poem, indicates that the free driving quality of good poems is arduously achieved, not born in one piece. . . . It has always been that true creators are those unique people who can [and will] *work out* ideas of any sort, inspired or uninspired.

The complementary conclusion reached by Rothenberg has it that actual artistic work “differs from ‘inspiration’ in that it is seldom accompanied by a sense of breakthrough, relief, or discovery.” To the contrary, “popular belief holds that poems [art works too] should not be constructed or contrived primarily to make a particular statement, but should rather be spontaneous emotive outpourings.”³⁵

³⁴ Ibid., 9, 10 (emphasis mine). (However, for the essential futility of “college” currently, see Sacks, *Generation-X Goes to College*.)

³⁵ Rothenberg, *Madness and Creativity*, 40–41.

The popular idea was, however, earlier challenged by a major author, one from whom, due to his popular stereotypification as a derelict drunk, we would least expect this precocious deconstruction of "Inspiration." In an essay of 1846, "The Philosophy of Composition," Edgar Allan Poe observed how

Most writers—poets in especial—prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy—an *ecstatic* intuition—and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes, at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought—at the true purposes seized only at the last moment—at the innumerable glimpses of ideas that arrived [only] at the maturity of full view. . . . It is my design [instead] to render it manifest that no one point in [creative] composition is referable either to accident or intuition—that [instead] the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem.³⁶

Quite to the contrary of the lay view, and complementing Poe's hard-won professional appraisal, as Rothenberg accurately observes,

Rather than relief, the overriding feeling reported [by artists and writers] is that of *tension*. In part, this *tension* is about *getting down to work*, [and] it is relieved by the process of [working or] writing. . . . It is also, however, a tension and *an anxiety about finding out what the poem* [or other artwork] *is really about*. . . . Over and over again, my subjects have told me that they seldom knew what a poem [or painting] was really "saying" until they were well into the writing [or painting], until they had actually finished it or, in some cases, until months or years later. When they did [finally] find out what the poem [or painting] was really saying; they then experienced a sense of illumination, discovery."³⁷

When I read this, I myself experienced the sudden shock of recognition, insight and revelation: "Inspiration" itself. *Eureka!* I may now confess that is exactly how this book was conceived—and how it erratically evolved, and similarly over a period of "months or years later" (and I have had similar, but more short-term, experiences in "creating" paintings). And that often excruciating experience of creative "tension" and "release," only regularly relieved "by the process of working," is fully in accord with my absorbing subject-matter: "Inspiration" itself.

³⁶ Poe, in Rothenberg, *Creativity Question*, 57–61.

³⁷ Rothenberg, *Madness and Creativity*, 41 (his emphasis).

But this perception is, in turn, nothing new. A shrewd observation made long ago (ca. 10 BCE) by the Roman poet Horace sums up all those modern clinical findings:

*Natura fieret laudabile carmen an arte,
quaesitum est: ego nec studium sine divite vena
nec rude quid prosit video ingenium; alterius sic
altera poscit opem res et coniurat amice.* (*Ars poetica* 408–11)

(It is often asked whether a good poem comes by nature or whether it is produced by craft. So far as I can tell, even with a lot of inspiration, without intense study, unimproved genius will never get very far. The two things must work together; they need one another.)

Here we have, and just as Dr. Rothenberg had more recently confirmed with his clinical investigations, a two-thousand year-old theory of the *Ars poetica*—meaning, in effect, all manner of creative endeavor (now including “Art”)—which similarly stressed the absolute need for hard work, practice, study, technique, “imitation” too. Without that, nothing worthwhile results, “even with a lot of inspiration.” Horace’s dithyramb included no hymn to spontaneity, or to what today we think of as the “creative” imagination, which is also now routinely equipped with its supposedly salutary dollop of “automatism.” Admittedly, even two-thousand years ago—just as today—it does help if you also have a pennyworth of *ingenium*, some innate mental capacity. Horace also identified—even then!—the classic costume traits and anti-social (“alienated”) conventional gestures of the forthcoming Bohemians and Beatniks:

*Ingenium misera quia fortunatus arte
credit et excludit sanos Helicone poetas
Democritas, bona pars non unguis ponere curat,
non barbam, secreta petit loca, balnea vita.
nanciscetur enim pretium nomenque poetae,
si tribus Anticyris caput insanabile numquam
tonsoni Licino commiserit.* (*Ars poetica* 295–301)

(Because an authority like Democritus has it that innate talent is a gift far more useful than is any piddling art, so he shuts out from the realm of the Muses all poets having sane minds. Accordingly, a goodly number of would-be *artistes* won’t bother to trim their nails nor will they cut their beards. These types haunt lonely places and avoid the public baths. Surely one will never win the esteem that goes with the name of “poet” if one entrusts to a barber a brainy head that all the Halazone in the world could never return to sanity.)

And what does this last, truly ancient observation actually prove? That there is *nihil sub sole novum*, “Nothing New Under the Sun,” especially in the history of art! In short, the skeptical Horatian assessment of poetic *inspiration* (also potentially applying to painters) lies in a clear-headed professional strategy: It’s just a job, for which you do need some real technical training, so get on with it; stop belly-aching—and do it right!

This ancient observation also brings us back to the issue of “the myth of the divine inspiration of [artistic] genius,” a myth intimately associated with Michelangelo (**fig. 1**), and so inspiring Barbara Kruger to express her righteous postmodernist indignation (**fig. 26**). Putting this pique into its proper historical context, we recall that E. R. Curtius had observed that even though “ancient Greece put the poet in the category of ‘god-like men’ . . . the Greeks did not know the concept of the creative imagination.” Accordingly, now-current notions regarding *any* kind of “divine inspiration” specifically propelling artistic genius, particularly the wholly pictorial sort, remained completely foreign to classical aesthetic theory. As Martin Kemp has shown in an excellently documented study, likewise the attribution of “divine inspiration” was essentially foreign to Quattrocento art theory, that is, before Michelangelo was himself opportunely dubbed an *artista divino*.³⁸ Thereafter, things changed, and just as has been documented here. Although Kemp chose not to examine Marsilio Ficino’s discussions of specifically “Bacchic” effects, as contained in his commentaries on the Platonic dialogues and such as these were published beginning in 1489, Kemp does mark the years immediately following 1490 as signaling a distinctive turn in the evolution towards the later Renaissance evaluations of the “God-like” creative intellect. As we saw, that honorific title was soon to embrace visual artists, particularly Michelangelo, whose Ficino-inspired *Drunken Bacchus* was conceived in 1496 (**fig. 1**).

Kemp documents how, that is before the *annus mirabilis* of 1490, the Humanist theorists in Florence hewed closely to their chosen model: Roman rhetorical theory. Then taken to pertain wholly to the literary disciplines, in any event, *la rettorica* demanded a thoroughly

³⁸ See Kemp, “From Mimesis to Fantasia,” esp. 384–95, “A Divinely-Inspired Genius?”

knowledgeable artist. Particularly Kemp also underscores the fact that the three major theoretical pursuits before 1490 were “the imitation of antiquity, [understanding] the laws of nature and [the place for] the artist’s originality in invention.” However, Kemp makes it perfectly clear that, as much for the poet as for the painter, *invenzione* was mostly a matter of the reworking of traditional *literary* subject matter. A given narrative or allegorical program would then be dictated to the painter or the sculptor by his patron, and most likely just as that Renaissance-era *maecenas*’s designated literary advisor had previously explained the significant details to him or her. In short, the artist’s contribution to such narrative “invention,” if any, was likely restricted to minor decorative details.

Given such suppression of the artist’s “originality” (in any event, an anachronistic term for those times), Kemp finds that the result—then—was a universal estimation of the role of the artist “which lies totally outside the frames of reference of Romantic and post-Romantic ideas of creativity. . . . The painter’s production of form was generally assigned to the realm of ‘composition’ and ‘disposition’.” In other words, before around 1490, typically the license for the artist only extended to little more than the strictly visual aspects of his given subject matter, and just as that had been worked out for him beforehand in full detail by much more learned minds. Also significant is the fact that “in specialist literature on the visual arts before 1450, references to ‘imagination’ are no less rare than in the humanists’ account of poetry.”³⁹ In short, there was apparently no latitude granted to what seems so significant in twentieth-century aesthetic evaluations, namely artistic “self-expression” and as necessarily posited upon a wholly autonomous act of “Inspiration.”

What might seem a precocious statement of artistic “self-expression” is contained in Leonardo’s famous auto-mimetic aphorism that “each painter depicts himself—*ogni dipintore dipinge se.*” Since, however, that really only signified that the industrious artworker’s products naturally tended to resemble one another, this scarcely approaches the notion of “self-expression” which seems only to have initially surfaced in French painting-studios during the Symbolist era. Still, the characteristically modern “expressionistic” idea itself required a creative license implicitly granted four centuries before in the idea of

³⁹ Ibid., 350, 355, 364.

“divine inspiration.” One of the earliest expressions of that enduring idea surfaced some time during the 1490s, when Antonio de Ferraris quoted Virgil’s *Georgics* in his *Il Galateo* in order to illustrate the idea that the poet is “inspired [*afflatus*] by a divine spirit” which thus makes the human creator “similar to God.”⁴⁰ Nonetheless, as Kemp aptly points out, “few humanist critics were prepared to grant *ingenium* to a professional painter, sculptor or architect . . . most humanists tacitly assumed that *ingenium* and the visual arts were inimical.” As Leonello d’Este put it explicitly: “the *ingenium* of the writers . . . is a divine thing and [thus it is still] beyond the reach of painters.”⁴¹

In sum, the idea of creative license, “self-expression” as postulated upon “Inspiration,” did not exist even in rudimentary form before the time assigned to the conception of Michelangelo’s *Drunken Bacchus* (fig. 1). To the contrary, the reigning idea was that one stated by Vitruvius shortly before the onset of the Christian millennia: “*Neque ingenium sine disciplina aut disciplina sine ingenio perfectum artificem potest efficere.*” Fifteen centuries later, the idea was literally translated into Italian by a notable sculptor and, slightly later, by an innovative architect; according to Lorenzo Ghiberti (ca. 1378–1455): “*Lo ingegno senza disciplina o la disciplina senza ingegno non puo perfetto artefice*”; and according to Francesco di Giorgio Martini (1439–1502): “*Lo ingegno senza dottrina o la dottrina senza ingegno l’artefice perfetto far non puo.*”⁴² The meaning conveyed by all three statements is exactly the same in modern English: “*Even with native talent, there can be no perfect work of art without self-discipline and structured instruction.*” And those two statements in Italian represent complementary up-dated versions of just what Horace had said fifteen centuries before!

However, all that changed following circulation of Ficino’s Neoplatonic commentaries in the 1490s, and just as we have shown in some detail. And, in turn, those latest scientific findings presented by Dr. Rothenberg (and Martin Kemp, too) take us right back to our initial historical observations, the ones specifically dealing with the collapse of Orthodox Modernism, and as presented at the very beginning of this hopefully “inspiring,” art-historical investigation. But, as to whether or not there still exists any future for *Inspiration*—even

⁴⁰ Ferraris, as in *ibid.*, 386.

⁴¹ Leonello d’Este, as in *ibid.*, 386.

⁴² Vitruvius, Ghiberti, Francesco, as in *ibid.*, 389.

for *ecstasy*, *mania*, *rêveries*, *enthusiasm*, *poetic madness*, and all the rest—I do not really pretend to know. I myself am not a Symbolist prophet-writer. In fact, I was only hired on to prosecute the case of the actual historical sources of post-medieval *Inspiration*, also demonstrating their largely forgotten contributions to Orthodox-Modernist artmaking, even to its characteristically “automatist” *beaux gestes*.⁴³ That job done, we may now—you and I—return to our customary post-modernist condition of abject intellectual passivity, a slacker stance representing the notorious “dumbing down” of America (Europe too).⁴⁴

A final observation is called for regarding our personified point of departure (**fig. 1**). Michelangelo, a truly *inspired* artist, could not even begin the grasp what it means—meaning equally physically and psychologically—to be a *post-modernist*.⁴⁵ One of the more baleful, but distressingly ubiquitous, signs of our stressed-out contemporary condition is the massive ingestion of so-called designer drugs by the jumped-up youthful urban-masses, with one massively ingested, literally neo-Dionsysiac, intoxicant fittingly named “*Ecstasy*.” Also blissfully ignorant of the fine art of post-modernist “appropriation”—meaning that which currently passes for Renaissance *mimesis-imitatio*!—Michelangelo would be equally amazed (or, more likely, appalled) at the theory-ridden, mostly uninspired, postmodernist stuff that passes for “art” today.⁴⁶ On the other, lower end—that is, as encountered tenaciously embedded in popular culture—still current is the canonized

⁴³ For an “automatist” how-to-do-it manual (including citations of easily accessible web-sites), see Phake-Potter, *Poetic Inspiration For Dummies: How to Create Modern Verse, For Better or For Worse*.

⁴⁴ For examinations of various kinds of anecdotal evidence pointing to this intellectually impoverished (and mostly apathetic) condition, see Fussell, *Bad or, The Dumbing of America*; Sacks, *Generation-X Goes to College*.

⁴⁵ For the weird psychology (almost, but not quite, neoplatonic) characterizing the current academic scene, see Phake-Potter, *Postmodernist Deconstruction for Dummies*; Richter, *Falling into Theory*; for its *real-life* effects, however, see Ewen, *All-Consuming Images*.

⁴⁶ For a thorough (but thoroughly non-skeptical) art-historical survey of these proliferating materials, where the slightest mental activity leaving any sort of vaguely physical trace proudly calls itself “art,” see (*inter multos*) Archer, *Art Since 1960*; Taylor, *Avant-Garde and After*. Even though nearly everything preceeding this final observation has been based upon pure “Kunstwissenschaft” (even though often made ironic in tone), I need again mention that I have myself painted, and even (but not lately) exhibited “abstract” paintings and drawings, also including some “Images [wholly] Made by Chance” (which I am still happily fabricating). Ergo, my position (to the contrary of Robjohn-Gibbings, as in his *Mona Lisa’s Moustache*) is not at all “anti-modern art”: I merely wanted to give some art-historical credit where it is long overdue.

graphic representation of modernist “Inspiration.” This commonplace image shows the clue-less cartoon character suddenly “illuminated” by a flashbulb captured in a “thought balloon”; so transfigured, he might even be seen to exclaim, “EUREKA!”

Perhaps, now that we have exhumed its actual history, it might even appear that “Inspiration” has recently turned out to be a not altogether positive force in shaping our collective cultural destiny. Presently, the routine celebration of *Inspiration* (even if given other nomenclature) seems something that has deluded the naive masses into thinking that the odd intuition is actually more worthy than is hard work and real knowledge: *disciplina et scientia*. The corollary fallacy holds that mere imagining is more significant than actually doing, even knowing *how* to do it (or anything at all). That particular notion—according to Francesco di Giorgio, “*Lo ingegno senza dottrina*”—is currently, and very prestigiously, represented by an especially emblematic artistic father-figure beloved of the postmodernist avant-garde, Marcel Duchamp. Particularly, it was his endlessly discussed “ready-mades” which proved that you can call yourself an “artist” after you merely select (for example) a mass-produced “Urinal”; once exhibited as “art,” indeed it becomes *art*.⁴⁷ Five centuries after Michelangelo, why really must we believe that the energetic, but essentially amateurish, mixed-media *bricoleur*, or pigment splasher, or *angst*-inflicted performance artist is to be reckoned a more valued component of society than is the grimy *banauos* (smithy or mechanic)? Now that the pertinent evidence has been provided, we may leave the final verdict on that provocative *paragone* to the figurative post-modernist jury . . .

For what it may be worth, I may now conclude by briefly presenting my own definition of “Inspiration.” Both professional and vocational, it simply calls the process—in short (or instead)—self-directed *work*. One starts with some general idea, or ordering perception, and its initial arrival, if you wish, may even be called “Inspiration.” Thereafter, the chosen endeavor (or *opus*) is necessarily carried out over a period of time, during which the original idea must evolve; specifically, it does so by adjusting itself to the accumulating data. Rather than “sudden,” the creative effort is—and

⁴⁷ For the historical evidence indicating that reigning vanguard evaluations of Duchamp are likely askew for the most part, see Moffitt, *Alchemist of the Avant-Garde*; for the real meanings of the “ready-mades,” including this (in)famous “*Pissoir*,” see *ibid.*, Chapter 6.

must be—*sustained*. Besides patience (and sweat), for its successful completion, essential for the operator are both acquired *knowledge* and a proper measure of *craft*; also indispensable is a large dollop of native *intelligence*, and that gives recognizable value to the completed opus. In art (as in scholarship), *there are no free lunches*.⁴⁸ Those nourishing windfalls are just another hypotheticized, hence mythical, “gift from the gods.” So was—and *is*—“Inspiration.”

Ite; missa est . . .

⁴⁸ See, similarly, the “Conclusion” to Harding, *Anatomy of Inspiration*, 101–12: “Before anyone could [usefully] give himself up to *inspiration*, he must have [first] acquired a mastery over his subject in order that the technical aspect should be in no way a hindrance” (101); “When the mind does not contain the materials for the solution no amount of subconscious (or conscious) work will provide it” (109); “The fact is that the principle underlying *inspiration* in [both] the [creative] arts and in [physical] science is the same” (110). Indeed it is!

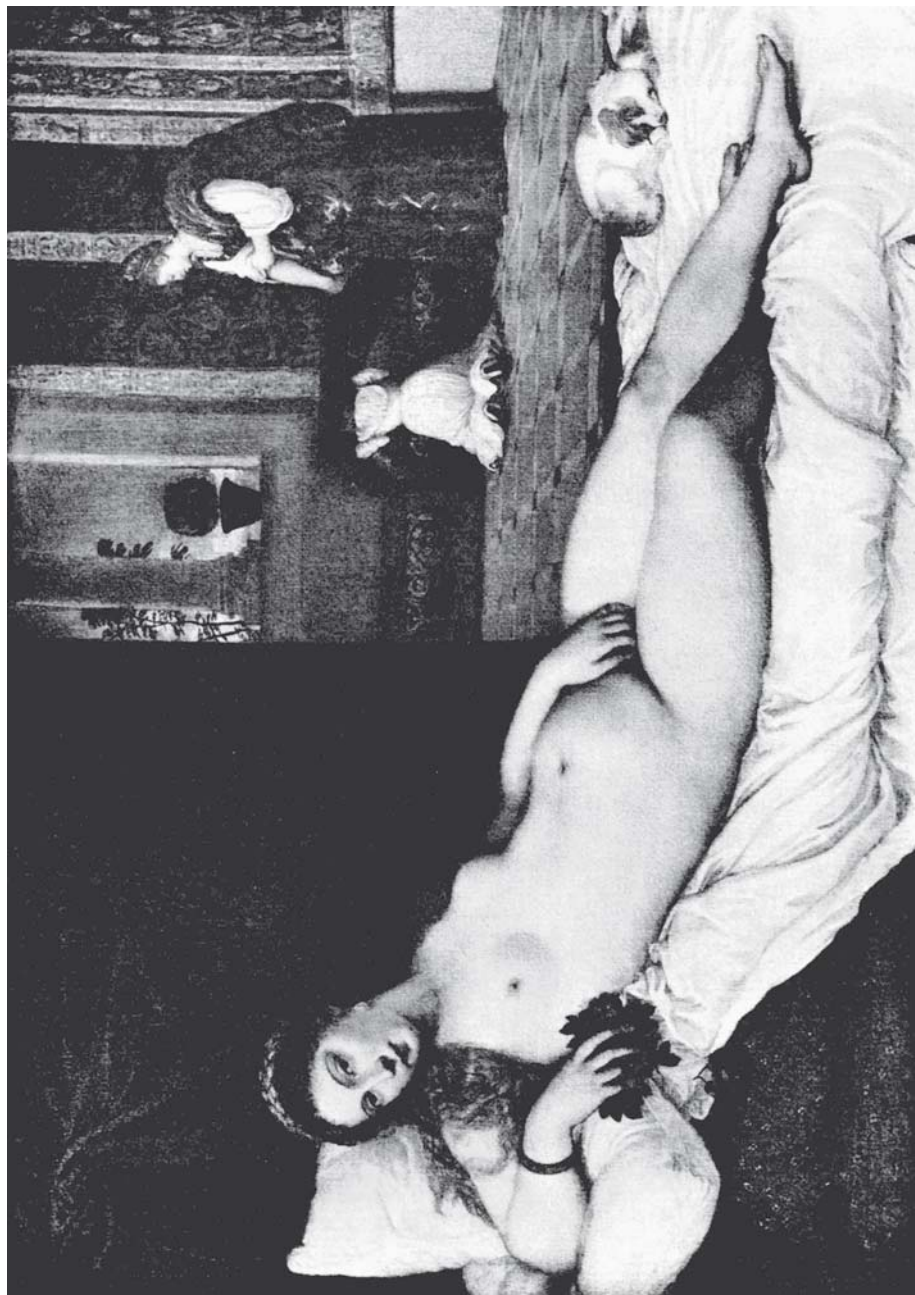
ILLUSTRATIONS



1. Michelangelo, *Drunken Bacchus*, ca. 1496-8. Florence, Bargello.



2. Michelangelo, *Rape of Hippodame* ("Centauromachia"), ca. 1491-2. Florence, Galleria Buonarroti.



3. Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, 1538. Florence, Uffizi.



4. Skopas, "Maddened Maenad," ca. 350 BC. Dresden, Albertinum.



5. Marten van Heemskerck, "Jacopo Galli's Roman Sculpture Garden with Michelangelo's *Bacchus*," ca. 1532-5. Berlin, Staatliches Museum.

In statuum Bacchi.

E M B L E M A X X V.



6. "In Statuum Bacchi" (from J. Thuilus [ed.], *Andreae Alciati Emblemata cum Commentariis*, Padua, 1621: Emblem 25).



7. Titian, *Bacchanal of the Andrians*, 1518-19. Madrid, Museo del Prado.



8. Antonio Correggio, *Jupiter and Io*, ca. 1532. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.



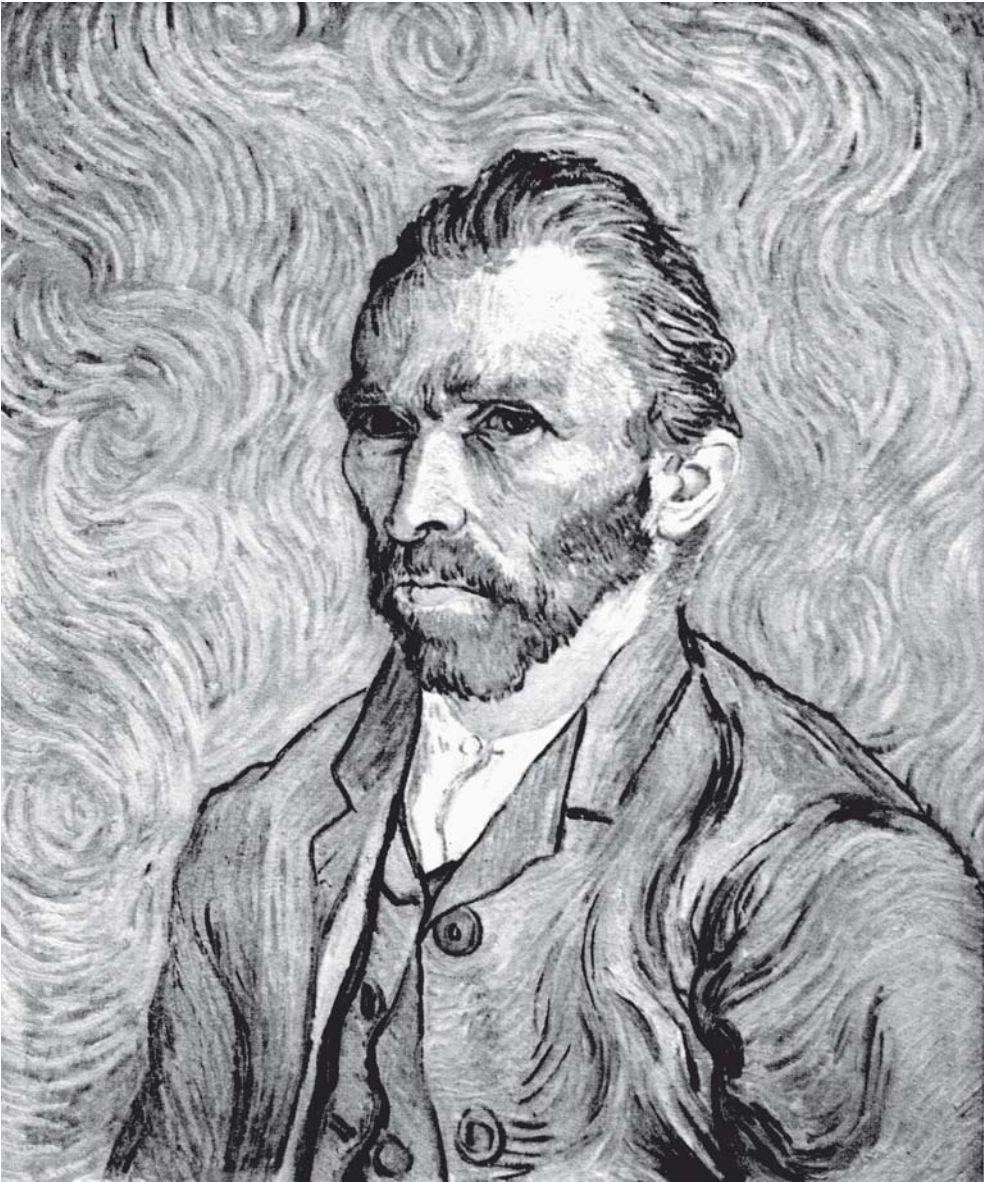
9. Raphael, *Transfiguration of Christ*, ca. 1519. Vatican, Pinacoteca.



10. Gian-Lorenzo Bernini, *Ecstasy of Santa Teresa*, 1645-1652. Rome, Sta. Maria della Vittoria, Cornaro Chapel.



11. "St. Mark," author-portrait from the *Gospel Book of Ebbo*, ca. 830. Épernay, Bibliothèque Municipale.



12. Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait*, November 1889. Paris, Musée de l'Impressionisme.



13. Michelangelo, *Il sogno*, ca. 1533, (chalk drawing). London, Seilern Coll.

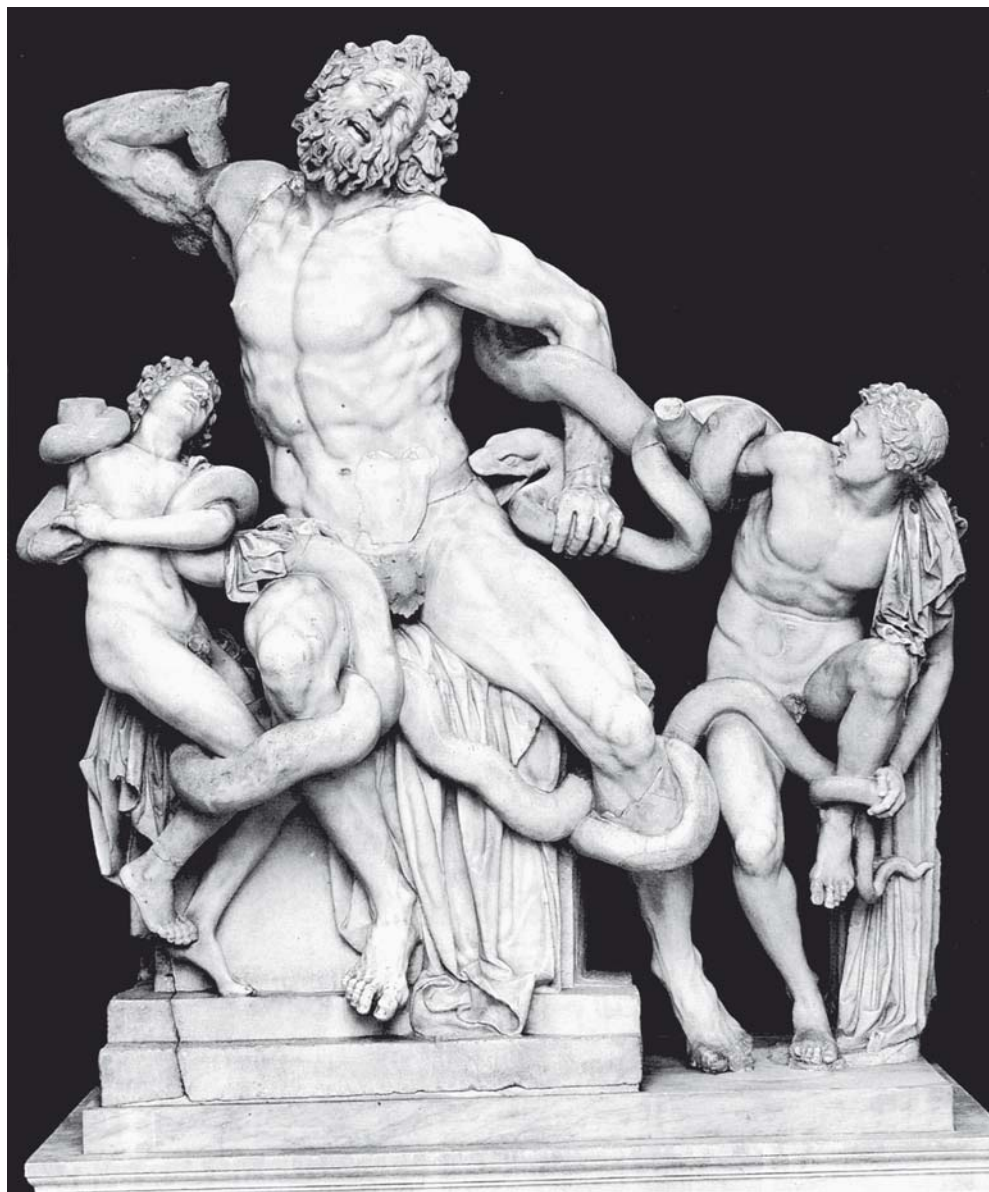
Vino prudentiam augeri.

EMBLEMA XXIII.



HAEC Bacchus pater, & Pallas communiter ambo
Templa tenent, soboles utraque vera Iouis.
Hac caput, ille femur soluit: hunc usus olim
Debitus, inuenit primus at ille merum.
Iunguntur merito: quod si qui abstemius odit
Vina, Dea nullum sentiet auxilium.

14. "Vino Prudentiam Augeri" (from J. Thuilus [ed.], *Andreae Alciati Emblemata cum Commentariis*, Padua, 1621: Emblem 23).



15. Hagesandros, Polydoros, and Athenodoros, *Laocöon Group*, ca. 150 BC. Vatican Museums.



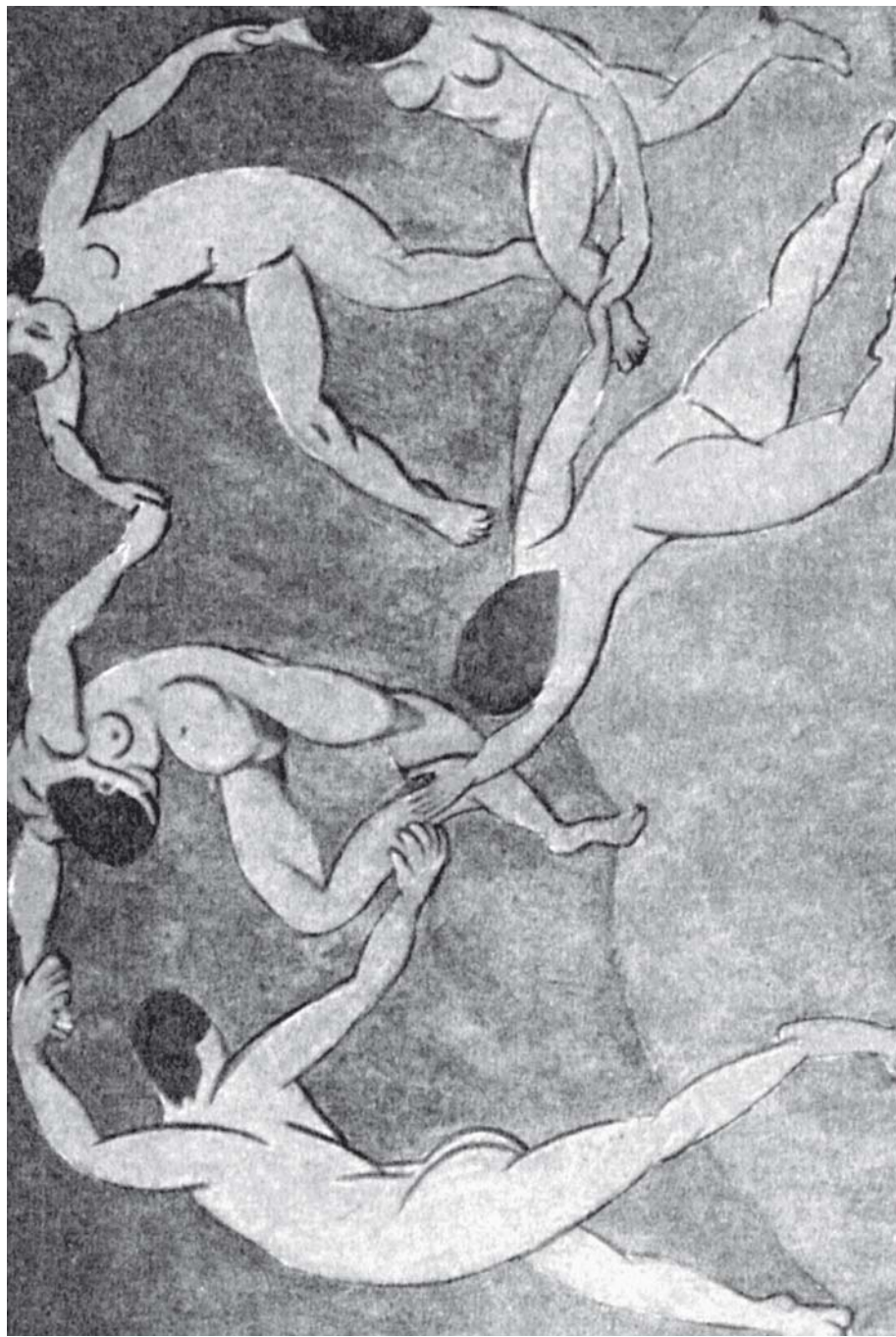
16. Leochares (attrib.), *Apollo Belvedere*, ca. 330 BC (Roman copy). Vatican Museums.



17. Francisco Goya, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (*Los Caprichos*, no. 45), 1797.



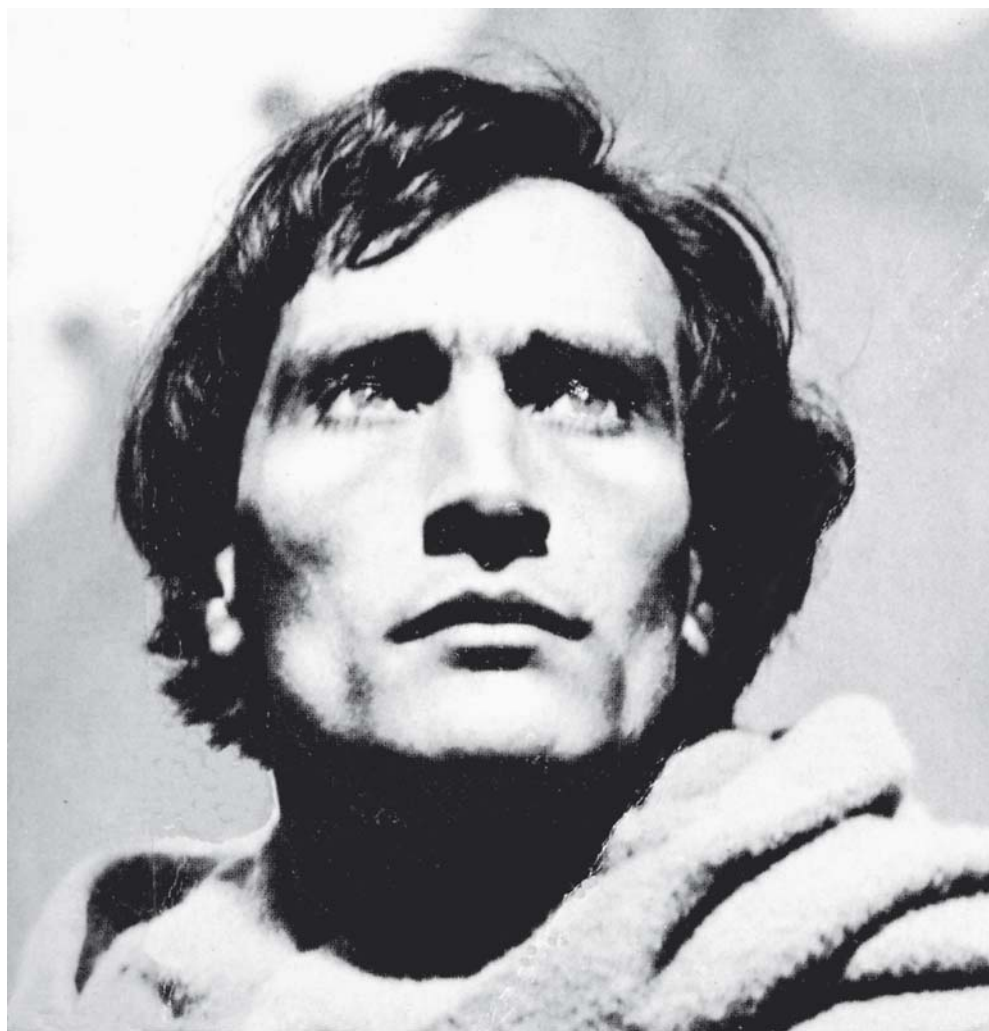
18. Paul Gauguin, *The Vision after the Sermon, or Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, 1888. Edinburgh, National Galleries of Scotland.



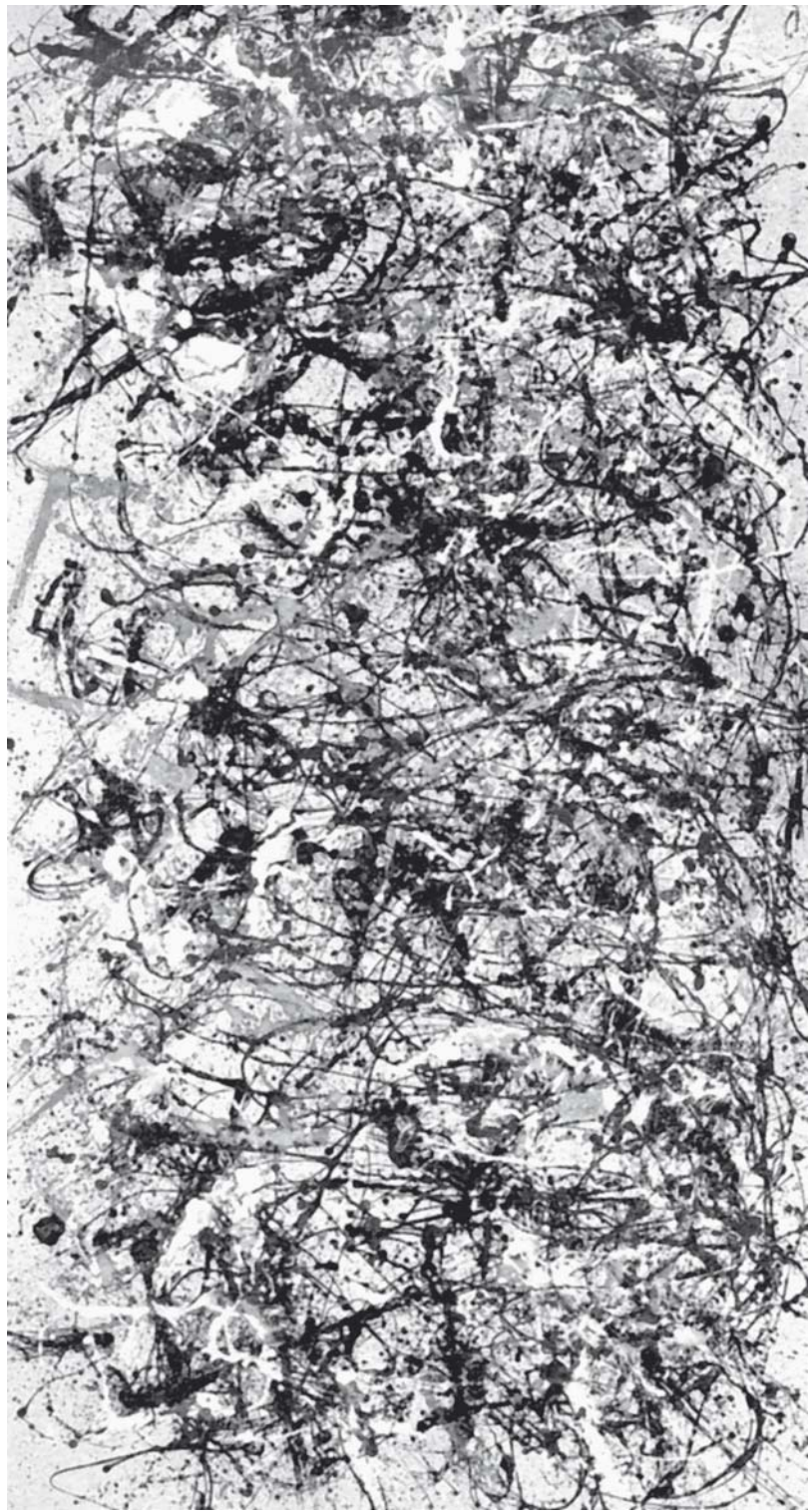
19. Henri Matisse, *The Dance*, 1910. St. Petersburg, Hermitage.



20. Choir of the Abbey-Church of St.-Denis, 1140-44, Paris.



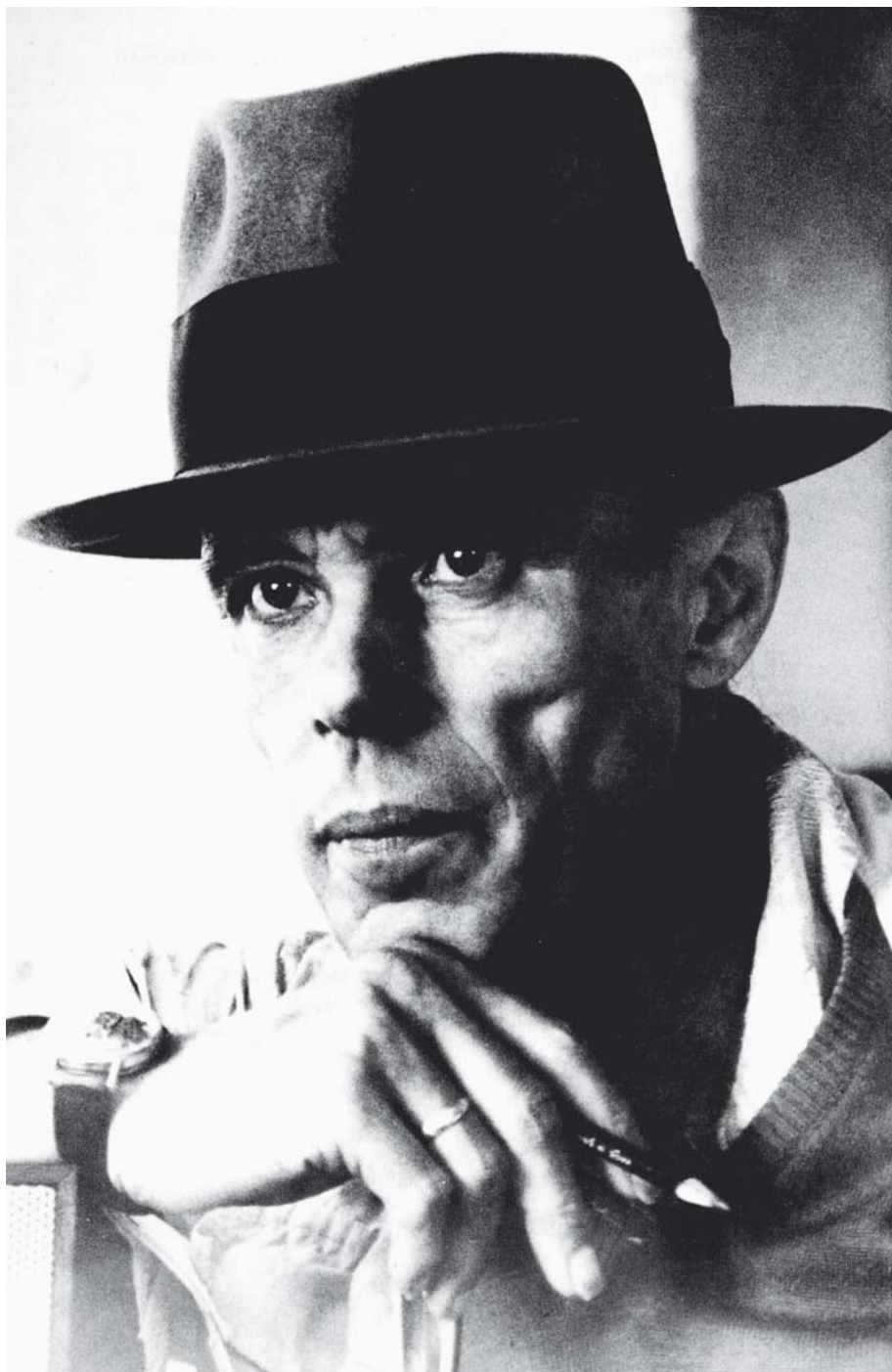
21. Antonin Artaud (1896-1948).



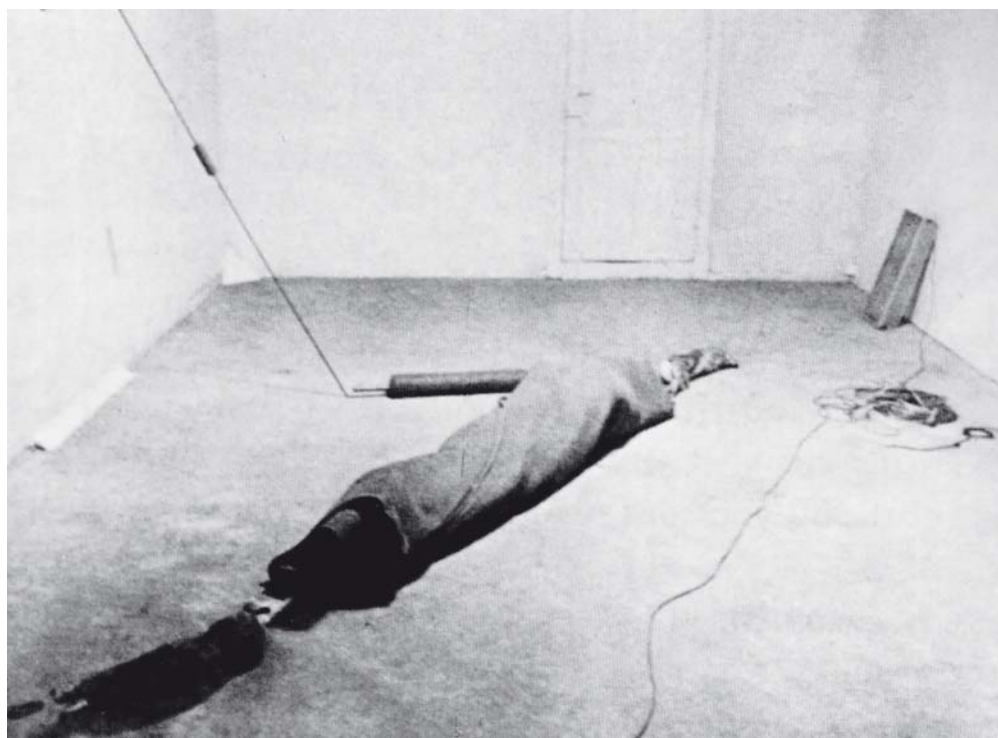
22. Jackson Pollock, *Autumn Rhythm*, 1950. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.



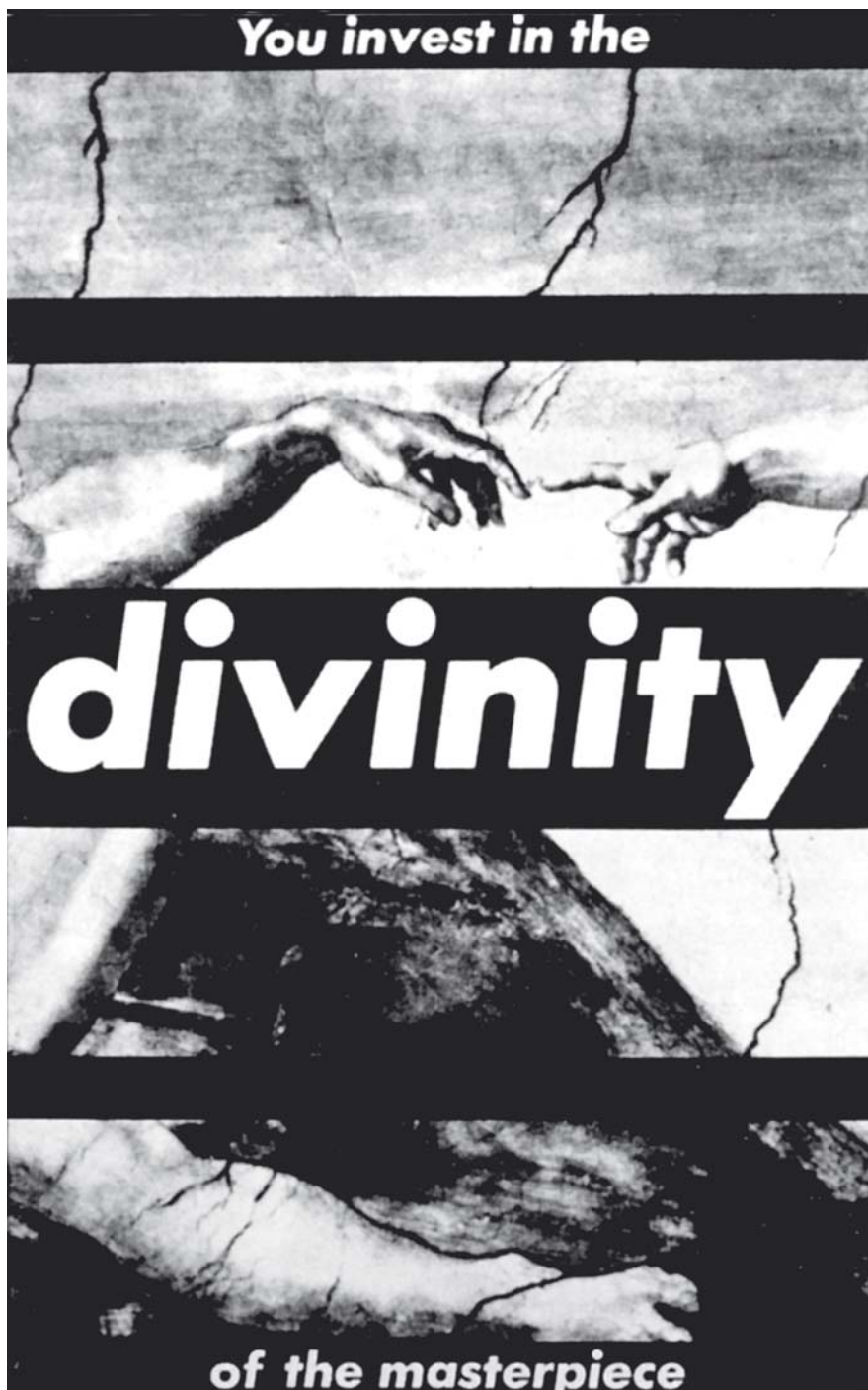
23. Hans Namuth, "Jackson Pollock at work" (photograph), 1950.



24. Joseph Beuys (1921-86).



25. Joseph Beuys, *The Chief* (photograph of an "Action," or performance piece), 1964.



26. Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (You Invest in the Divinity of the Masterpiece)*, 1982. New York, Museum of Modern Art.

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